

THE UNDIVIDED

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For Maria

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CHAPTER ONE

LA MULTI ANI

RICHARD BYRNE pushed his way through the small crowd of assorted Romanian dancers pounding the concrete floor to the cheap beat of euro-pop. The crackling thud thud thud, mercilessly distorted by low wattage speakers, had finally become unbearable. He had sat at the plastic table for two hours awaiting his contact, enduring the stale stifle of spilt beer, sweat, cheap scents and cheap Romanian cigarettes; he would sit there again in a few minutes, but no amount of information was worth such relentless torment without at least some occasional relief. Fresh air and quiet were both long overdue.

The dancers let him pass. They were mostly comprised of locals from the village, dressed up for the opportunity to flaunt their western compatibility in Polish and Turkish imitations of teenage fashion wear. There were also, Byrne had heard, some rich children mixed amongst the throng: anorexic daughters of doctors and lawyers down from the city for the new year holiday, sporting Levi jeans and Nike trainers, and dancing a self-conscious foot-to-foot shuffle in the corner. Hence, he presumed, the rather forced joviality amongst the men, their roars of wholesome laughter and hearty backslapping there to distract from the dirty desires lurking within. Byrne had watched them from his table, seeking to snatch a glimpse of amusement with which to ward off the dull pangs of boredom. In between these healthy displays of male bonding, one would slide across to the bar, there to ask the DJ, a spotty adolescent enjoying the sudden importance of his pirated disco tapes, for another slow dance and another opportunity to hold one of these slender beauties in his thick, grimy arms. But Byrne had gained no enjoyment from his study; in their own way, the rich girls were no less transparent than the men -

temporarily free of their stiff parentage, they were there for fun and flirtation and, with hands to giggling mouths and excited backward glances at their friends, they fell into those brutal arms, probably convinced that loss of virginity to this handsome peasant would be the crowning achievement of their night. And so Byrne had turned his mind to other things, or rather to one thing in particular which had been haunting him with worrying frequency lately: that he had nothing, absolutely nothing in the world to live for.

It did not particularly bother him. Fact, after all, is fact, and you live as best you can with it. But the fact was inescapable. For fifteen years now his life had revolved around the British Secret Intelligence Service and all its dealings. And for every piece of life that had been given to him over these years, so now he realised that something had been taken away. He had been a young man when first he had come to all of this, still part of society, still susceptible to the gentle movements of the cosmetic culture of media and tradition that flowed easily through the classes. Everything had seemed so straightforward then. Even now, with the changes that had passed, he could see the new generations openly accepting it all, the old with the new, and slipping smoothly into those same old streams, which never really changed for all their new colours. That was how it was if you had a 'job' or even a 'career': rarely a challenge around the corner; rarely a question; rarely a chink of light between the pieces of this marvellous jigsaw. So how many kindred spirits would Byrne find when finally this romp came to its inevitable end? Bit by bit the illusion of a comfortable society had been stolen from him and now he could see not only how the pieces fitted together, but also how they had been designed to do so. And Byrne was no longer part of this society, he had moved from his part of the puzzle and got stuck in the brittle glue between the pieces. He had seen it all, and too much. And he wasn't quite so sure he wouldn't rather be shot dead by some nefarious foe, whilst things were still good. Better that than promotion to a seat behind some desk.

A few months ago Byrne had made a last minute alteration to his holiday plans and cancelled his booking at Interlaken's Victoria Jungfrau in favour of a campsite plot not five minutes walk from the

hotel. It had seemed, at the time, like a moment of inspiration. He would meet, he had reasoned, *normal* people: normal, middle aged people with children and a saloon car; normal people who would like to have barbecues in the evening and sit outside their tent in deck chairs swilling cheap red wine about in their glasses and chatting until it was dark; normal people with no ounce of an understanding, nor inkling, nor care, of the dirty, stinking machine of which Byrne was a small, but deadly part; maybe, he had reckoned, just possibly, he would be able to loose himself in it all, for just a minute, and catch a fleeting glimpse of that innocence he had lost all those years ago. Byrne was not in possession of a tent, so he'd booked with a holiday company that maintained ready erected tents of their own on site. He'd flown into Basle, as planned originally (purely because he enjoyed the oddity that Basle international airport is actually in France), picked up a car there and taken the Berne road, then the N6 into Interlaken. And his accommodation was a large canvas construction of red and green - hardly at one with nature, but roomy, and fairly luxurious as far as tents went, he supposed. He had a cooker and fridge, white, plastic loungers with cushions and a white plastic table with a red and green parasol to go with the tent. On that first evening he had eased himself into the lounge and sat back to watch the setting sun set the tip of the Jungfrau ablaze, and to listen. With two glasses of kirsch warming his belly and his thoughts and another on its way down, the sounds of the site had been gently hypnotic: the splish splash of children enjoying their last half hour of play at the pool; the chinking of glasses at work and the murmur of easy chatter from the outdoors bar by the takeaway; the urgent cries of a friendly football match and its leathery thuds; the sound of flip flops on the gravel paths; the bird song... And mingled with it all, the summer smell of barbecued supper and grass cuttings. But then an argument had awoken his dozing cynicism - a mother shouting at her children for using too much toilet roll. And after that all the conversations of the site had seemed to descend upon him with all their clichés, their arrogance, their pettiness and their clumsiness. The personal anecdotes (read somewhere). The criticisms. The moans. The point-scoring comments, wrapped up as quips or puns. The one-

liners. The artificial laughter. And the shouts from the football pitch were oaths and obscenities yelled for the slightest of reasons. Yes, for a tiny moment he'd believed in it, but Byrne could only feel disgusted with himself for this. And, cursing his naivety, he'd marched out of the site and down the short walk to the Höheweg casino. The kirsch had flowed freely that evening. It had helped soften the blow that the vast majority of these tourists were British. Where on earth was the point in all the glory of such an ultimate purpose when the culture you were striving to protect was so despicably twee, stiff, petty and unimaginative, and so thoroughly alienating?

And then, yet determined to glean some form of enjoyment from this solitary recreational hell, Byrne had then taken to the sights. He dined in the revolving 'Piz Gloria' restaurant atop the Schilthorn peak and he walked the route to First and admired the North face of the Eiger with all the appropriate respect. And, dutifully, he made the trip to Jungfrauoch, Europe's highest railway station at 11,300 feet, but this, the "finest excursion in Switerland" (and, by chance, also the most expensive) was just to yet another panorama of mountains. It was not that he didn't appreciate the scenery for all its magnificence, but rather that the magnificence simply failed to hold his interest for very long. Often a glimpse of powerful scenery was just that little bit of extra inspiration he needed in a tough and difficult case, but only because it served as a reminder to him of all things bigger and wiser and older than him in the world, and of his own minuteness; whenever he actually had the time to spare for it there were always more interesting things to be done. Views were only any good when you couldn't be there, Byrne had decided. Thoughts of a place inevitably got tangled up with all manner of romantic associations, but in reality a place just existed.

From his place in the corner of the musty little bar, Byrne had wondered what all of this told him about himself. *Am I a boring person?* he had mused. *Am I too unemotional? Too mechanical? Am I too negative?* If he was any of these, it was his job that had made him so, he proposed. Too much deception does that to you. Too much death denies optimism a place in your thoughts.

At last he reached the door. A sharp tug jerked it open with a

screech and the bitter cold of the Transylvanian winter tumbled into the bar as if it had been taken by surprise; as if it had been leaning there secretly, listening to the muffled disco noises. Byrne stepped out onto the small concrete veranda beyond and pulled the door shut behind him. There he lit the last of his duty free Benson and Hedges and stood peacefully, resting his arms on the piece of rusty piping that served as a balustrade and letting his eyes wander through the moonlit village of Remeti. He watched the comings and goings along the main road and the intersection that formed the heart of the tiny settlement. People were walking cautiously in little groups - cautiously, for the snow of three days ago was now a thick layer of watery ice, sparkling and deadly. They were walking from house to house on drunken routes of new year goodwill, or walking to the bar to disco or to the shabby village hall, the *caminul cultural*, where a local band was banging out the frenetic squeal of *muzica populara*. Like ants, the groups would meet, exchange a flurry of handshakes and kisses, converse briefly and then move slowly on. Or sometimes the greetings would be shouted across the width of the road, where the risk of crossing its perilous breadth was not considered worth the while of a quick transaction of pleasantries. Above them all, the jagged horizon offered by the three mountains surrounding the village - *Coasta Fruntii*, *Dealul Veisei* and *Dealul Lui Codoban* - ripped across the edges of the quiet sky. It was a clear night tonight; the view of the starry heavens, unobstructed by any sodium streetlight haze, stretched as far as the delicate wisp of the Milky Way.

Byrne sighed and glanced at his watch. His newly acquired understanding of Romanian punctuality was still convincing him that the continuing lateness of his contact was not necessarily indicative of a serious change in situation, but soon it would be midnight and he had a feeling that Romanian new year celebrations might make discreet conversation a little difficult. The little slip of paper he'd found beneath his pillow in his room above the bar had assured him of a meeting at nine o'clock sharp; specifically 'sharp' and in the same hand as the note he'd discovered in the same hiding place in his hotel room in Oradea: *Mardando. Remeti. Room 1. Now*. It had taken him half an hour to determine what and where Remeti was and twice as

long again to convince a taxi driver to take him there on the bad roads, all of which had attracted far more attention than was at all desirable. Perhaps indeed the attention itself had cost Byrne the meeting. Perhaps his contact had been secretly monitoring his handling of this situation: assessing; measuring; evaluating; watching carefully for the qualities that he would want in Byrne: efficiency, discretion, intelligence; looking out for the telltale signs of ignorance and sloppiness that would spell the end of any further communication and for his application to be dropped like a hot brick. Perhaps Byrne had failed this test and his wait was now for nothing. But then perhaps this too was a test; perhaps someone wanted to know just how determined Byrne was to get this work and what to lengths and pains he would go to ensure it. Perhaps he was being watched now, at this very moment.

Again he examined the village, but this time the cold, grey eyes scrutinised every tiny detail. The spy searched for the spy. *Where are you?* thought Byrne, *Show yourself! You've had your fun, what are you waiting for?* But any number of darkened windows and doorways could have concealed a secret observer. Any member of the small groups of passers-by could have been watching him through a guise of occasional glances. But then an unexpected movement caught his eye and Byrne's attention darted across to the dirty, white Dacia that stood not ten feet away on the other side of the road. He had considered it empty, but the brief flare of a match had betrayed the presence of an occupant. Now, in the yellow remainder of the flame, Byrne fixed the features in his mind as the man lit his cigarette. It was a large face, darkened with a hint of gypsy blood, and accordingly the hair was thick and black. This was a comparatively well-dressed and well-groomed man: a white shirt peeked out from the opening of his leather coat or jacket and the curly hair was clean and cut to a civilised length. It was a cruel face, the eyes bore the unmistakable veil of total disinterest for all life around him. It was a look Byrne knew well: this was the face of a man who killed for money, the type he hated the most. Just as the man was shaking out the light he turned his dull gaze towards Byrne, and Byrne smiled cheerfully back. *Got you*, he thought. And then the match was dead.

A sudden invasion of noise and smoke onto the veranda signalled the opening of the bar door. The proprietor stepped out purposefully and looked directly at Byrne. Byrne had weighed her up a long time ago and not for a moment did he believe her to be part of the grand plan that had brought him here, but he was being watched so he smiled and said good evening. She was an odious woman, blithely obese and ridiculous, and reeking of an assumed self-importance. Her red-dyed hair, her thickly overdone make-up, her mass of gold jewellery, her embarrassingly short skirt and her constant pouting - and that she could possibly consider the resultant combination even slightly attractive - gave one the urge to laugh out loud, but her power was real in this village. She had a packet of Kent cigarettes in her hand, the expensive symbol of wealth carried by most Romanian doctors and lawyers. She took one out and lit it, then offered the packet to Byrne. He took one of the white filtered cigarettes and lit it with his Ronson, declining her offer of a light; it was dry, stale and empty, like most self-indulgent tokens of self-supposed elitism. She prodded the animal fur draped around her shoulders into place, blew the smoke of her first inhale at a fashionable point somewhere over Byrne's left shoulder and said, "You ok, mister? You have problem?"

Byrne had made a half-hearted attempt to learn Romanian before his departure. He had bought Deletant's *Colloquial Romanian* and he had dropped in at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies to chat to a lecturer there. But he was not about to embark on anything complicated now, because he knew how these conversations could go. So he fell back on something easy. "Ma doare capul," he said, "My head aches." Which was, after all the truth.

"You want aspirin?" she said immediately, and added, "is good!" as if the medicine was some sort of traditional Romanian remedy unheard of in western lands. Byrne turned the offer down on the grounds that it had been a while since he'd eaten, which the proprietor immediately proposed to be the cause of the headache. "Come eat!" she said, waving frantically at the door, "Eat!" And, since Byrne had had his ten minute break, and observed therein that the cogs of his processing were indeed still in progress, he could see no logical reason for remaining outside. So he made a reluctant return to the

tortuous interior; back to his red, plastic patio table in the corner, whereupon the proprietor mouthed something incomprehensible at him and disappeared behind the bar.

There was someone new at his table now. The skinny old man, with a face full of grey stubble, had been replaced by a pretty girl of about twenty-five. The former had owned Byrne's company for a good hour earlier, during which he had unhurriedly made his way through half a crumpled paper packet of rather battered looking Bucegi and two triple measure glasses of Transylvanian vodka, making occasional drunken remarks on, Byrne had guessed, the antics of the young, and a good deal of slow, determined gesticulation and shoulder patting. And Byrne had mostly ignored him, discreetly timing coughs and swigs of his Ursus to fill any expectant silences. Here was a change, and perhaps it was a significant one. He knew immediately that the table's new occupant could not be Romanian: she was blonde, and her look and dress were of a subtlety he had yet to observe in this land. It was more than that: she looked healthy. She was leaning back in her seat and gazing absently, indifferently, at the chaotic merchandising behind the bar, holding a half-smoked, hand-rolled cigarette between the fingers of her left hand. She too was drinking beer, but from the bottle, rather than a glass (an uncouth habit of the modern young which Byrne found strangely attractive), which she played with absently, spinning it around and around in a small pool of spilt beer on the table. Who was she? thought Byrne. Was this his mysterious contact? Was she the writer of the anonymous notes? Perhaps unfairly, he had judged the author of the bold, but stiff handwriting to be male - but, in truth, he had spared the matter very little thought. Now he retrieved the mental record he had made of the two slips of paper and looked at the letters again. It was a continental hand, of that he was certain, for the nine had been curled and the one top-tailed. But could he place the gender of these foreign strokes? Now he was not so sure.

A few words would establish the situation. Byrne was debating his opening sentence when there came a gap in the music, and she said to him, in perfect, Irish scented english, "You can't be Romanian."

Byrne laughed. "Actually," he said, "I was just about to say the

same to you."

Her face lit up in a smile. "You're English!" she exclaimed, shouting the last word as yet another disco track commenced.

"You're Irish!" he returned.

The hand stopped playing with the bottle and reached across for his. "Hi!" she shouted, "I'm Ciara Kelly."

"Byrne," replied Byrne, "Richard Byrne." They shook hands. "What brings you out to the back of beyond, Ciara?"

She pulled hard on the little white stub that served as a cigarette, found it to be dead and set about trying to relight it. "I used to work here," she said, pushing the butt's head into a lighter flame, "as a volunteer. The orphanage, you know?"

"Ah, yes." The large, concrete building, almost the centrepiece of the mountain village, had made an impression on Byrne. The children's cries were audible from an uncomfortably large distance; he had worked hard on convincing himself that they were cries of delight. "That must have been, uh, a bit of an eye opener," he commented.

She smiled at some private joke. "Anyway," she continued, "that was two years ago. After my degree. I'm just visiting now, to see how things have changed."

She gave up on the cigarette and tossed it into the ashtray, and immediately she embarked upon the creation of its successor. Had things changed? Byrne asked. "Well... some things have changed, of course," she replied, pulling strands of tobacco from a battered tin and arranging them along the fold of a paper, "Some things are the same. When I first came, three years after the revolution, there was no bar like this - just a little co-operative bar that sold only vodka and cold coffee. But at least the vodka and coffee were affordable. There's much more choice now, but no-one can afford it. Everything's too expensive for your normal, average Romanian; even the basics, like bread and sugar."

Byrne found himself becoming irritated by the fiddliness of her task. He peeled the cellophane off a box of Rothmans he had bought in Oradea that morning and proffered its contents eagerly. "Please," he said, "have a proper cigarette."

"No thanks. Those things give you lung cancer." She paused, to run her tongue across the gum. A final roll and the job was complete. She pinched one end flat and placed it between her lips. Fire. Satisfaction. She sighed.

"And the children?" asked Byrne. He remembered very well the pictures of bald, naked orphans crammed into cold, stinking cells. As usual, the british press had failed completely to follow the story up.

"The children have changed, of course." Absently she picked loose strands of tobacco from her tongue and dropped them in the ashtray. "At least these children have. They were more or less animals when the volunteers first arrived. Social isolation, you see - no-one had ever taught them how to behave. So that's what we did - with varying degrees of success, I might add. Some of them could now pass for normal teenagers - socially - some have progressed hardly at all; the majority are somewhere in between. The problem is..." She frowned momentarily, as if listening to some-one in the distance, pointing something out to her. "The problem is that these kids have no future. Legally they have no right to one. So they stay here until they're eighteen and then they're transferred to an adult mental institute in Nucet. So all of this socialisation is pretty much in vain, really. We might just as well have left them as animals.

"All things are relative, of course," she said quickly, "the children are warm and comfortable now. They eat well. They receive plenty of attention from the new staff and schooling in the morning. The doctor in charge of the orphanage now is a wonderful person, I think she really loves the children and I know they love her. What do they want with freedom and future? They have everything they consider important now. They're happy. They're happier then a lot of free, normal Romanians. If it were only possible they could just have the opportunity... Those who could do something with it... But how would that work? Who would find the money for foster parents, accommodation and private tutoring fees for them to catch up academically? That's the real problem, you see: money. Money money money."

"What did you study at university?" asked Byrne. He couldn't tolerate money moaners.

"Oh," she said, "Psychology, actually. At Southampton."

"Does that mean you're psycho-analysing me?"

"Do you know," she said, pretending to be serious, "there's a certain type of person that always says that."

Byrne laughed and she smiled vivaciously, seemingly happy to have pleased him. The gloom was suddenly gone from her eyes. She went on to explain that there were two more responses one could reasonably expect upon the revelation of one's study in the subject. One was to challenge the psychologists' arrogance in assuming they know anything about people, who are all individuals, and then to give an in-depth account of their own psychological theories, which they had learnt in the 'university of life' or one of its affiliates. The other would commence with a claim such as, "Oh well, you'd be interested in my life - you could probably make a case study of it!" followed by an in-depth account of all the therapy they had been through. Byrne let her talk, content to watch her features as they danced across her face in time to the lively words.

Then he looked at his watch. Christ! What had he been thinking of? For fifteen minutes he had been sitting there engrossed in the girl's conversation and oblivious to all around him. His contact could have been, seen and gone in that time. *Yes*, he thought angrily, *that's just what you need right now*. And he could picture the scene in C's office, the Chief of Staff standing awkwardly in front of C's great desk, looking angry and embarrassed: "Message from 409, sir. Says he's ballsed up the job somehow. I gather he, uh... got distracted by some woman." And C would nod solemnly and reach for his pipe. He would say something like, "Byrne's womanising has always been his weakness. All my predecessors have said so. A man of his age should know better than to gawp at every piece of skirt that walks by like some perverted little schoolboy." And that would be that. Byrne would be 'promoted' to a safe little office, where he could no longer embarrass anyone; packed away in a cardboard box full of paper, to be forgotten and to rot, disgraced and deservedly so. *Pay attention, you stupid bastard! Act like a bloody professional!*

The wooden squeak of the bar's door opening cut through the disco fuzz and, as the wash of cold air swept into the room, Byrne looked

up to see a slim, dark haired man standing in the entrance and slowly surveying the room. He was dressed in the usual scarecrow style of the *taran*, the village peasant - in his case, a torn sheepskin jacket over at least three pullovers, grey flannel trousers and red wellington boots. His hair was long and dirty, but combed approximately into place, and a pair of metal framed glasses rested on his nose, with thick lenses that made his eyes bulge. The proprietor, who had been dancing a shameless provocation in the centre of the floor, marched angrily over and demanded that he shut the door. He did so, but not once did he look at her. The eyes continued their gradual sweep, until finally they came to rest on Byrne. And there they remained.

At last, thought Byrne. He excused himself. Air, he said, but Kelly had noticed the entrant. Byrne pushed his way through the throng once more and, as he approached, he noticed that the slight build of the newcomer was deceptive. The loose clothes concealed a wiry frame; this man was strong and athletic. He acknowledged Byrne's approach with a slight nod, but did not move to meet him. He waited until Byrne was beside him and then he said, "Mr Byrne. I am late." It was a statement. "Please come with me now."

They went out onto the veranda and down the few steps to the main road. There they walked for a good five minutes, a lover's walk through a small mass of snow covered cottages dangling from the starry sky by their thick chords of moonlit chimney smoke. They walked to the intersection and beyond. Presently the man said, in the same disinterested tones, "You like our mountains?"

"They're very beautiful," Byrne replied cheerfully, damned if he was going to be intimidated, "but I'm not much of a mountain man, personally. A nice view to look out on in the mornings is always pleasant, but then there's the rest of the day to think about."

The Romanian grunted and took a left turning onto a gravel track that ran down towards the river a little way. They came to a large metal gate. He whistled loudly and the gate moaned open; a fat, greasy face poked out from the opening. The two men exchanged a few short words and then Byrne was led into a large, gravel courtyard and the gate was shut behind them. Fat and greasy lit a Bucegi and started to explain something and they stood for a few moments, whilst

he slowly made his way to his point. Meanwhile, Byrne took his surroundings in. The courtyard was rectangular and defined in the following way: to his left a largish garage, suitable, perhaps, for about three cars, if they were all Dacias; to his right just a rusty, corrugated iron fence; and, in front of him, a three storied house on the fence side and a storage hut of some sort on the garage side. Between the house and the hut there was a path to the open space beyond, where Byrne could just make out the glint of reflected moonlight. Above the river's distant rush, he could hear a secondary flow of pump-fed water coming from that direction.

"The fishing company," his guide announced suddenly, "Here we breed fish for the region. Trout. In a year we turn over almost fifty million lei. It is a very profitable business." He led the way across the courtyard to the path. "Expenses for the running of the plant in one year do not exceed ten million lei. This includes salaries and maintenance. Thus our annual profit for the year is equivalent, approximately, to ten thousand pounds. A very respectable figure, in Romania."

They stood at the start of a field of thirty fish beds, each of about two yards by five and arranged in three rows of ten. The beds were concrete, about three feet deep, and isolated by narrow concrete pathways interlaced with the two wider walkways traversing their breadth. The Romanian took the lower of these, where an Alsatian lay sleepily. The dog raised its head to check on the footsteps and yawned a sign of casual recognition, thumping its tail lethargically a few times as it did so. The man patted it briefly, then continued with his matter-of-fact description. "These seven beds to my left," he said, waving in that direction, "are for the young fish. The end three over there are currently dry. You will notice that the beds are arranged on a slight inclination: water is pumped up from the river and then allowed to run back through the beds." He took a sharp right hand turning onto one of the narrow dividers and walked deftly up to the other main walkway. Byrne followed, pondering the impenetrable waters around him and reflecting that he had enjoyed several men's fair shares of deadly fish encounters already in his life. The rest of the tour was conducted in silence. They walked back towards the house.

At the end of the walkway the Romanian stopped to look back across the beds and allowed a short moment of awkward silence to pass. Then he turned to Byrne and said, "Ok?"

"Ok," said Byrne, wandering whether this was an appropriate moment to query the relevance of fish farming to his presence in Remeti. But the Romanian was off again; down the six steps to the ground floor entrance to the house, where he produced a set of keys from the sheepskin jacket and proceeded to unlock and open the door. He cautioned Byrne to wait outside a moment whilst he turned on the light. And half a minute later the dull glow of a sixty watt bulb spilled out into the cold night and Byrne stepped inside. The ground floor of the house, he was mildly surprised to discover - not that he was in any way an expert on such matters - was actually a set of six miniature fish beds in two concrete rows of three. Of these, the centre-left bed was empty, the beds on either side and the corresponding right-hand beds were full of wriggling baby fish and the centre-right bed was packed full of fat-bellied, adult brown trout. Packed too full, thought Byrne, and, on closer inspection, noted that they were all either dead or very close to dying. From the ratio of fish to water therein they were presumably all of them oxygen starved.

The Romanian crossed the central walkway to the far-side wall. "Come here," he said flatly. He punched a five digit code into a control pad that had been concealed behind a fake electric socket. Byrne waited for something to happen. Then, from somewhere below them, there came a dull, metallic clang. The empty fish bed shuddered. Slowly, with the whine of polished hydraulics, it was pushed up and over its right-hand neighbour, revealing, bit by bit, a stone stairway leading down to bright, florescent light and the humble mutter of activity.

The slim Romanian allowed the tiniest of smiles to cross his mouth. "Now," he said, "you will see what really happens here."

Fifteen fantastic minutes later, he was seated in the luxurious office of Nicu Ivanescu, swirling the last of his second double bourbon around

the bottom of a crystal tumbler and smoking a Benson and Hedges from the wooden box on the table between them. This office and the spacious laboratory outside, he had learned, were sited ten feet below the fish beds he had just toured. And that was the least of his acquisitions; the fat, genial Romanian, who was known to the villagers above only as the boss of the 'fishing company,' had just described to him, step by step, the workings of one of the most ingenious heroin smuggling operations Byrne had heard of in his life. His host now wore a broad smile of professional pride, for he had seen the gleam of appreciation in Byrne's eyes. It had pleased him. He took a packet of Snagov from his coat pocket and lit one up with a contented sigh. Ivanescu was a sensible man, cautious and thorough in every respect. When he retired from all of this (in two years, or thereabouts, he had promised) he would indulge then in all the luxuries life had to offer; until that time he would remember where he was and pay the proper respect to discretion and consistency: he had always smoked Snagov, the villagers knew he had always smoked Snagov, therefore he continued to smoke - and enjoy - Snagov. Attention to minute detail, he had explained, was the key to any successful deception. Little things counted. And people counted. The team of five that worked here had been hand picked by Ivanescu over several months. They were the best. He treated them all with respect, like any good manager should. They knew the risks and they knew the rewards, and they knew very well the penalty for disloyalty. The eyes had hardened at that point: a glimpse of the man beneath the smiles and the handshakes and the belly-wobbling laughs; a glimpse of the man required to supervise such an extraordinary criminal feat. Disloyalty, he had added, was a very ugly thing, a very ugly thing indeed.

Byrne could hardly believe his luck. Never had he anticipated so successful a penetration so quickly. Meetings, yes, but in poky little rooms tucked safely out of the way; in the white Dacia parked outside of the bar, perhaps, or a darkened corner of the *caminul cultural*. He had expected a much longer and tougher route to the heart of the operation he had come here to destroy. Now all he had to do was to find a way of terminating the business here permanently and a way

out for himself. And then Harry Black, Byrne's old enemy and the man that was undoubtedly behind this masterful strategy, would be defeated yet again; left to pick up the pieces, to curse again Byrne's existence and to start from scratch once more. Yes, this had to be Black's work. Who else could have devised (or funded) such a plan? Credit where credit was due, the American had certainly not been inactive in his absence from the drug smuggling scene. He had slipped up only by being spotted twice in Oradea within the same month, by the visiting British Consul; one of those 'little things' and one for which he would now pay dearly. And yet, thought Byrne, could he really afford to action a plan that left Black to walk free once again? Experience certainly showed him not to be a man whose appetite was dampened by defeat. He *would* start anew, and his next operation would be bigger and better still, and better prepared again for Byrne or Byrne's successor. If Byrne could play along for just a while this overweight Romanian might lead him to Black and the opportunity to put this genius away for good. It had to be worth it, it *had* to.

Byrne emptied the glass in his hand and Ivanescu immediately set to refilling it. Byrne said, seriously, "So let me get this straight, Mr Ivanescu, because I want to be sure of my facts. The raw opium you process here comes down into Romania from Russia -"

"The Ukraine, Mr Byrne, the Ukraine," said Ivanescu. The Romanian had a perfect grasp of English. "From Russia, yes, but into Romania via the Ukraine. That is important. Part of the Ukraine used to be owned by Romania; when the Russians took control of this region they moved many of the Romanians there into Siberia and repopulated it with their own as an attempt to prevent any future revolutions, but a few of the original families remain. We have a man working on the Ukranian border from just such a family. He is keen to re-establish his roots and his culture. Regularly he crosses the no-man's land between the two border posts to chat to the guards on duty at the Romanian border at Halmeu. He asks them questions about Romanian life and culture. Occasionally he makes gifts to them of leather boots or jackets, which he claims are from his uncle's factory in Vinnitsa. It took a while, but they grew to like him. Now he knows

them all by first name. When he announced a few months ago that he had discovered relatives living in Baia Mare they were very happy for him and of course they waved the usual vehicle inspection when he went to visit them, and have done ever since. Friendship is important in my country. He has a small, old van, nothing special - it is, he explains, the only transport his family owns - but it is large enough to contain the barrels of raw opium which he then brings down to here."

Ivanescu was repeating himself, but he seemed to be enjoying the re-iteration. "When the opium arrives here we extract the heroin and mix it with a little water to create a highly concentrated solution. This is then injected into the stomachs of fish that have been specially prepared over the preceding month - for the first three weeks they are force fed to stretch their stomachs, for the last week they are starved, and then, before the heroin is injected, they are killed through oxygen starvation so that none of the drug will be digested. The fish are then frozen and taken straight to Oradea, to the warehouse of an import-export company we own - Carpathians general import-export SRL. There the fish are sent out of Romania to a british distributor we have shares in and sold on, at a tiny price, to a small romanian restaurant tucked away in a barely noticed corner of London. Our chef there keeps a reasonable trade cooking hamburgers, hotdogs, fish and chips and bacon and eggs for the local workforce, and, just occasionally, traditional Romanian dishes for the few novelty eaters that pass by. Maybe they think it a little funny he insists on specially imported Romanian trout for his menu; perhaps they consider him eccentric or a liar or just plain stupid. But that is all. There the heroin is dried out and sold on and that is the end of the line so far as we are concerned."

It was the sheer audacity of the plan that so impressed Byrne. He asked, eagerly, "How long did it take to set all this up? Did you oversee it all personally?"

"The operation is funded by an American called Harry Black," said Ivanescu. "He made all the initial arrangements. Now that the system is going he leaves the Romanian side of the operation to me."

Byrne felt his stomach tighten as the casually mentioned words confirmed everything. "Harry Black?" he said innocently, "Can't say I've heard of him. Sounds like a pop star's name. Is that his real

name?"

"I don't know and I don't ask." Ivanescu's eyes narrowed with disapproval. He opened a drawer in his desk and brought out a packet of sunflower seeds which he proceeded to eat, one by one, splitting each shell open with his teeth and flicking out the kernel within with his tongue. He watched Byrne cautiously. Finally he said, "So, Mr Byrne, now you know all about us. I have taken a great leap of faith. All I know about you is that you wish to work for someone in narcotics. Why, may I ask? And why Romania? And why Oradea?"

Byrne shrugged casually. "I have a few debts at home. I need money, fast. I read something in the Times a while back about the Turkish drug route to the west through Romania. The article mentioned the Hungarian-Romanian border at Bors so I decided Oradea would be a good place to look. I made enquiries. You know the rest."

Ivanescu fired a cold glare at him for that last remark. He stubbed out his cigarette in a pile of broken shells. "What sort of work did you have in mind?" he said.

"I came with no preconceptions. Like I said, I need money. I'm in no position to quibble. But now that you've described your operations, one job does come to mind. I run a small business in the outskirts of London. Machine tool spares. I regularly make trips about the country to see my clients. How is your dealer distribution in England? Perhaps I could make a few more trips and drop off goods to your sellers on the way."

Ivanescu waved his hand dismissively at the idea. "We do not concern ourselves with distribution," he said, "I told you - we have a buyer in London. He gives us a good price. We have no plans for expansion in that area. Do you import?"

"Yes," said Byrne.

"Then perhaps you might be of use to us there. Specifically, what sort of machine tool spares do you deal in?"

"Chucks. Chuck jaws. Mandrels. Anything to do with workholding."

"Say you were to import from Romania. What sort of goods would interest you?"

"Well," Byrne said, "there's metal, I suppose. Machineable lengths. We also manufacture, you see. I've heard Romanian prices are very competitive, but I would be worried about the grade. Then there's the age old problem of finding new jaws for chucks that went out of manufacture years ago. Nine times out of ten we have to tell the client his only option is to buy a new chuck, since the parts just aren't made any more, but I've often wondered if some of the eastern european countries are still making spares for these machines. Businesses like mine rely on favourable recommendations and it would help to be able to keep these clients happy - they think we're only trying to fob them off with a new chuck, of course."

Ivanescu contemplated the proposals. He said, "I prefer the metal idea. We could hollow out the lengths and stuff them. Besides, metal export is a regular thing. It won't attract attention."

"No, that wouldn't work," Byrne replied. Presumably this was some sort of test. "Lengths are ordered by weight. If you drilled a hole down the middle you'd make the export too light. You could make up the weight by adding extra metal, but then the bulk would attract attention. Besides, where are you going to find the drill bit up to the job? How about hydraulic cylinders? If I could order them from Romania we could certainly stuff them. Pneumatic cylinders are bigger still."

The eyes gleamed. The Romanian smiled. "You see," he said, "it pays to be varied. Naturally we trust our man in London, but you can see how difficult a situation we could have if suddenly he got - say - ill. And there's only so much drug that'll stuff a fish. Anyway, we *are* looking into other forms of export. Perhaps you've come along at an opportune moment. We'll work the details out later, Mr Byrne. For now I must contact Mr. Black and arrange a meeting." Ivanescu turned to the computer on his desk and started typing. "I will e-mail him at once. Please look into the camera. It's just a precaution, of course. Mr Black likes to see who he's dealing with."

Resting on top of the computer monitor was a small digital camera connected to the system unit via one of the expansion ports. Byrne froze. Would Black recognise him? The two had never actually met, face to face, but perhaps Black had photographs - photographs of

'Johnathon Grant,' with his short cut hair and thick moustache. Byrne had reluctantly composed the alias because Black's work had initially appeared the work of another old enemy. It had never been intended to fool completely, just from a distance or by word of mouth; Black would easily spot the likeness if he had a picture of him from then. Byrne smiled pleasantly into the lens, hoping cheerful features might confuse a match with whatever deadly mood a spy camera could have caught him in. A thin sweat broke out across the palms of his hands.

How long would it take for Black to reply? He would have to wait until that moment before deciding whether or not to act now. And then, if it had to be, he'd have to deal with Ivanescu quickly and silently, for the laboratory side of the office was windowed and only the open venetian blinds would impair the view outside of the goings on within. Byrne was armed only with a small air pistol disguised as a ball point pen, and an explosive concealed within the soles of his shoes. With the former he would aim for the right eye. The pistol made hardly a sound and the pellet's lightness would not disturb the body. With any luck no-one outside would notice a thing, which would give him the minute or so necessary to assemble the explosive. Then he would have to bluff his way through the laboratory, where Byrne's initial contact (Vasile, he had learned) was currently working with two others on the heroin concentrate. Place the bomb. Get the hell out. It was messy, but it would have to do.

Ivanescu pressed a key and sat back in his chair. "I've sent the message," he said, shaking out another *Snagov*, "It might be a while before Mr Black replies."

"I'm in no hurry," said Byrne. "Actually, I have all year."

The Romanian smiled. He glanced at his watch. "Yes, Mr Byrne," he said, "you're right. In fact we have just... two minutes to go." He pulled himself out of his chair and walked across the office to a small fridge. Inside was a bottle of champagne. "Fifteen seconds to go," he said, peeling off the foil. He counted down. Then the cork flew across the room with a satisfying pop and there were cheers from the laboratory outside. Ivanescu laughed. He took two flute glasses out of the drinks cabinet behind his desk and filled them to the brim. "Happy new year, Mr Byrne."

"La multi ani," corrected Byrne, "there's still two hours to go in England."

"La multi ani, then. Thank you." They toasted. "And maybe for you, this year, *multi bani*." The Romanian laughed at his own wordplay. "How did you get into debt? Please, I ask only out of curiosity."

"Gambling," said Byrne. "It's a weakness in our family's blood, it seems. My father and my grandfather were both the same. Twenty-one. I could write a book on the game and if I was paid a pound for every word I'd still be up to my eyes."

The Romanian nodded solemnly, as if he knew the problem well, and then the fax machine by the door rang once. "Aha!" said Ivanescu, "Our reply, I should think." Paper began to creep out of the machine. "Mr Black is not normally so prompt. I wonder what he has to say."

Byrne had not anticipated a return by fax. Unpredictable. That, presumably, was exactly why they were using such a system. It meant he had to rethink his plans and there was no time to do it in. Ivanescu had walked around his desk for the fax machine and now he had his back to Byrne; he was gently pulling on the paper and reading. He was silent. Byrne forced his mind to clear and measured angles and distances. If he shot the Romanian in his current position the fat man might easily fall into the window as he slipped out of life - through it, even. But then the guillotine sliced away the single page and Ivanescu was on his way back around his desk to the leather chair that would support the weight of his dead carcass. He sat down, his gaze still fixed on the flimsy sheet of paper, which he held up to his face, obscuring his features. What was he thinking? What was he planning? Byrne reached casually for the pen and, as he did so, noticed Ivanescu's right hand creep below the level of the desk...

He took aim.

"Well, Mr Byrne: it's settled then." Ivanescu's hand returned with a pen. "Mr Black will meet us tomorrow in Oradea. Oh, you have a pen, I see."

"Damn thing seems to be dead," said Byrne quickly. He thrust it back into his jacket. "Can't understand it. Only bought it this

morning."

"Probably Turkish." Ivanescu scribbled some details onto a sheet of paper. "The Select. Two o'clock sharp. It's in the main street, on your left as you come down from the station. Big restaurant - you can't miss it. Co-operative in Ceacescu's era, still is really - that's why hardly anyone eats there anymore. You will make your own way to Oradea - I'd rather the villagers didn't see us together. Tell anyone who asks tonight that you went with Vasile to change some dollars into lei - he regularly does so with a group of English volunteers that work in the orphanage, so that won't arouse suspicion. Little things, Mr Byrne, eh? And now you must go. Go back to the bar. Stay a while. Chat. Drink champagne for your own new year. A bus leaves for the local station at Stina de Vale at seven o'clock tomorrow morning from the intersection. The train departs at quarter past eight and arrives in Oradea at half past ten. Ok?" The Romanian handed Byrne the paper. "I'll see you tomorrow then. Happy new year, Mr Byrne. Welcome to the party."

The village above was celebrating. Byrne walked slowly back to the bar amidst an irritating jangle of cheering, car horns and firecracker bangs.

Ciara Kelly was still at his table and conversing with the proprietor, who was picking at a plate of greasy sausage as she spoke. Kelly saw Byrne first. "You were gone a while," she said. She nodded at the sausage. "That was meant for you."

"I lead a charmed life," said Byrne. He said to the proprietor, "Imi pare rau doamna. Am schimbat dolari."

At what exchange rate? she asked. Two thousand five hundred, Byrne replied off the top of his head, but he knew the rate was a poor one. *Doamne fute pe Vasile*. She would have given two thousand eight hundred. She threw her hands up in despair.

Kelly was impressed. "You speak good Romanian," she said, "Don't tell me this is your first time here."

"Actually it is." Byrne thought he would try out the cover. "I'm

here on business, sort of. Looking for a new metal supplier, officially, but I thought I'd make the trip into a bit of a holiday as well - get some air, see some mountains, you know. I'm a partner in the company, so I can do that sort of thing. I hate visiting a foreign country and not knowing the language - besides, it's bad for business - so I crash-coursed before I left. Although in fact it was a lot easier than I'd expected. I had to study Latin at prep school many, many years ago and Romanian is very similar in form and vocabulary. So I learnt the basics quickly. The basics, mind - I couldn't hold a real conversation." He said to the proprietor, who had picked up on the thread of the conversation and was nodding in agreement with Kelly, "Un putin, doamna, un putin."

The disco had been defeated by excited chatter, but the new year celebrations showed no sign of dwindling. Every new person that entered the bar was greeted and kissed by all friends and relatives, and the lengthy toasts to prosperity and health, which involved every single paired combination of a table's glasses, were many and frequent. Champagne and *tiuca* and cheer flowed through the bar like the wind of the new year itself. *La multi ani. La multi ani. La multi ani.* They sung. They laughed. They drank. Byrne felt envious of their uncomplicated celebration and sad that he could not feel the same elation. New year, for him, was but an opportunity to reflect on the destruction and death he had been part of in the previous twelve months and to wonder, as casually as possible, if he would still be alive for all of the next. And tomorrow he would continue in that same fashion, starting the new year off by murdering an American because some kids in England were stupid enough to believe satisfaction existed in a drug. He had expected this opportunity to make him happy, but all he felt now was flat. Byrne sighed and downed the remainder of his *Ursus* in one, silently toasting his hosts and apologising for the dirty intrusion.

An hour and a half later, in his small room above, Byrne's watch beeped the second hour of the Romanian day. Kelly lay below, pouting, waiting for the kiss that would commence their lovemaking. But Byrne paused, overwhelmed suddenly by the emptiness of his existence. Yet another death tomorrow, yet another girl tonight.

Where would it all end? Girls and glory was one thing, but girls and glory, girls and glory, girls and glory... It had to be unnatural.

"What?" she asked softly.

"Two o'clock," said Byrne, "That mean's it's midnight in England."

"La multi ani, Richard."

"Happy new year," Byrne corrected. He pressed down on the full lips and held her tightly. For a moment he felt young again and free of all the chains and all the dust, but then a strange exhaustion swept through him and they rolled over, for her to take control. The rhythmic motion of her breasts before his eyes was like the hypnotising swing of a watch. She became blurred. She became faint. And Byrne felt his arousal drain out of his body, and the warmth of sleep crept in.

CHAPTER TWO

TELEPORTATION, ETC

MARY ADAMS, the new head of station Z in Zurich, was a spinster in her mid-thirties and not at all as Byrne had supposed her to be. For some reason he had anticipated a much sterner woman, more the sort of upstanding icon of British correctness and decorum that would pick up on the smallest pieces of inappropriateness in one's conversation in wholly unamused tones. The archetypal English headmistress, with her tweed suit and tightly bunned hair, had sprung absurdly to mind during his flight and he had subsequently made an extra trip to the toilet to check that his tie was straight. But Mary Adams had an attractive, unassuming face, which beamed at him upon his arrival and which seemed to demand nothing other than for one to feel comfortable in her presence. Byrne took a liking to her instantly, and he scolded himself on his stereotyping.

Adams was the perfect hostess, offering drink, pleasantries and a comfortable seat in a small sitting room before the business of the day was even mentioned. Finally, with two hot mugs of earl grey tea, she brought in a bright red 'eyes only' folder and put it down on the settee between them.

"So then," she began, "Professor Weinstein. Why don't you tell me what you already know and I'll embellish if necessary at the end."

Byrne collected his thoughts and his mind drifted back to the previous week; to the headquarters of the British Secret Intelligence Service, the new, majestic building on the south bank of the Thames at Vauxhall Cross; to C's spacious office, inconspicuously placed on the middle floor; to the man himself, the chief of MI6, sitting across the desk and introducing this bizarre new case. The situation had been strangely odd, a sort of *deja vu*, where much of what C had told

him about this eccentric scientist, whom Byrne could swear that he had never heard of before, had seemed somehow familiar.

"Don't know quite what to make of this," C had told him, "All rather odd really. Still, we'd better look into it I suppose. Got to justify our budget somehow." He tossed over a pile of assorted photographs, held together by a paperclip and Byrne began to sift through them with growing unease. They were all rather grainy, the inevitable effect of over-enlarging long-distance shots, but the subject in each was easily identifiable. It was a tall, lean man, aged, Byrne guessed, about fifty. His face was pale, but hard, and the features thereon seemed to have been arranged in a purely functional fashion. The greying, receding hair was thin and cut short, and parted neatly on the left hand side. The nose and the lips were thin and cynical, and the eyes were cold, grey and penetrating. He was clean shaven. But for one of the photographs, Byrne would have guessed this to be a man for whom emotion and enthusiasm were utterly alien concepts, except that this final picture in the pile, taken in a cafe somewhere, showed him conversing with an unknown companion and with an energy and excitement that was quite surprising for the face: he was crouched slightly, leaning in towards his attendant to emphasise the importance of whatever point it was he was making; the left hand was about to relieve its cigarette to a glass ashtray on the table between them, perhaps so that it could assist its right partner, which was gesticulating so wildly that the fingertips were slightly blurred; the eyes were wide open and ablaze with vigour and the mouth hung open, as if it was in the process of shouting or spelling something out word-by-word, as though he couldn't trust the listener to reach the desired conclusion unaided. Byrne looked back through the other pictures and concluded that this was a highly disciplined, highly intelligent man with some sort of heartfelt cause. Try as he might, he could not place the face, yet he was sure he'd seen it before.

"His name's Weinstein," C said, "Donald Weinstein. American; now living in Switzerland. Born in Chicago in 1945. Only child. Parents both killed in a car crash in 1975. He graduated in physics at Oxford in 1966 and then went on to get his doctorate and what have you. He was an exceptional academic, apparently, but they threw him out,

shortly after his parents' deaths, for 'unorthodox research' so he moved to Bäsle to set up - had a bit of cash from his parents' estate, you see, so he fitted in rather well over there. The official line taken by those who can remember him at Oxford is that his experiments were dangerous - a lab assistant was blinded in one incident - but our... 'friends' over there tell us that there was a little more to it than that - more of a general distaste for his line of work than a concern over his methodology. They think the accident was set up."

He paused to fill his pipe. C seemed faintly embarrassed by something, almost reluctant to go on. Byrne wondered if it was his turn to speak and said, "So what was he working on then sir?"

"I was just coming to that, 409," C said testily. He puffed a few times on his pipe, spinning the ritual out as far as it could possibly go and then sighed. "All completely over my head, of course," he said dismissively, "damned scientists never have been able to explain anything in plain English. They're a bitchy bunch of bastards if you ask me." He coughed. "Ever heard of something called 'matter transmission,' Richard?"

Byrne was surprised by the use of his first name. "No Sir," he said, "I'm not familiar with that term."

"'Teleportation,' then? I'm told that's a more colloquial term for the process, though in what circles I'm sure I don't know. No? Well then..." C shifted in his seat awkwardly. He looked sternly at his pipe for a moment and then held it out for Byrne's inspection. "How would you describe this object?" he asked.

Byrne looked carefully at his chief. "It's a pipe, Sir," he said, feeling faintly stupid, "a briar, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes yes, of course it is." C looked irritated. "But imagine you were describing it to a person who had never seen or heard of a pipe before. Then how would you describe it?"

Utterly mystified, Byrne said, "A device used for smoking, consisting of a tube attached to a bowl. The smoker fills the bowl with tob-"

"*Good lord, 409!*" the chief blurted, "Surely you know *some* english. I said *describe*, not *define*. *Describe* this - *this* - pipe to me."

Byrne found himself wanting to laugh. What on earth was the old

man getting at now? He cleared his throat and said "Well then... it's a small object, consisting, as I said, of a tube attached to a bowl. The tube measures approximately ten centimetres and has an external diameter of about fifteen millimetres, although a good four centimetres worth of the non-bowl end is flattened slightly. Two thirds of the tube is black. The remaining portion - the bowl end - and the bowl itself, is made from a sort of, uh... what is that?"

"Briar," said C levelly. "Hence the name. Alright, 409, that will do. You've got the general idea. Now, supposing you had to give a complete, absolute description of the pipe, free from any references to anything other than base elements. Not only would you have to mention the materials used for the component parts of the pipe, such as briar, but also the molecular structure of the materials themselves, yes? Briar only means something to someone who knows what briar is - it's just a word, a label. In fact there'd not be much point in mentioning the word *briar* at all, really. Absolute description, 409. Take a television picture, for example..." C put down the pipe, "the signal received by your television is not composed of descriptions of the objects contained within that picture, but of a dot by dot description of the light received by the camera lens. *Fundamental information*: this dot here is red, this dot here is green, this dot here is blue and so on - so that the picture may be reproduced on every television in the land. Now, if a machine existed that could similarly describe an actual object - absolutely, fundamentally and in a transmittable form - and a machine existed that could receive and reconstruct that object from this highly detailed information, then you would have a means of transporting an object from A to B instantaneously, and through whatever transmitting medium your signal could penetrate. Do you see, 409? That is matter transmission."

Byrne did not see. He said so, trying to sound as intelligent as possible. "And this is what Weinstein was working on?" he added."

"Yes," C said. "Don't worry yourself too much about the mechanics of the idea. I'm only repeating what I've been told and - I'll be honest with you - it still makes absolutely no sense to me. But try to appreciate the implications, 409. If a person could be transported by

this device the potential for crime would be quite severe: radio a fellow into a high security area, wait for him to get hold of whatever it is he's after, then radio him back out, booty and all. Drugs, secrets, arms, explosives - whatever your fancy might be. And, of course, there's the implications for terrorism - we'd be virtually defenceless against bomb placing. Put the two together and you've got an horrific combination. You could steal a couple of warheads from Plymouth in the morning and blow up London in the afternoon."

"If such a device existed, sir," said Byrne, "It all sounds a bit far fetched to me."

"I never implied otherwise," C said gruffly, "Believe me, I take no more pleasure in being forced to take the matter seriously than you do 409. If you ask me it's all bloody airy fairy. There is a point to this, if you'll just let me continue.

"Perhaps I'd better start from the beginning. Just before you went off to Romania we learned from our friends in Washington that small quantities of munitions had been recently reported missing from army stores in France, Italy and Germany. The CIA thought this might interest us because the circumstances surrounding each of these thefts were rather odd. In each case there was no evidence of forced entry into the warehouses in which the arms were being stored. All alarm systems were fully operational and showed no signs of being tampered with or sabotage. Security guards report that they sighted no trespassers or unauthorised personnel entering or leaving or, in fact, anywhere near the warehouses over the time period in which the items supposedly went missing, and the CCTV recordings of that period - from inside and outside the warehouses - confirm this absolutely. The arms just disappeared. Now, if it had just been one country we would, of course, have assumed it to be an inside job. If it had been all three, but over the period of, say, a year, we might still have assumed the same. But it would appear, 409, that these thefts all took place within the same month, so I think you'll agree that coincidence must therefore be respectfully ruled out.

"The appropriate personnel over here were all notified of this situation and a complete stock check was ordered for all British munitions stores - here and overseas - in case we had suffered any

similar losses. In fact we had not - at that time. All stock checks confirmed their inventories." C paused to take a photograph out of a folder on his desk. "But we did find this," he said.

Byrne took the photograph. It showed a rectangular box placed on centimetre squared paper that identified its length and width as six and three centimetres respectively. It had been carefully opened and the lid placed to one side. Byrne cast his eye over the components contained within and tried to identify something. A few parts had been tagged with strands of coloured thread pinned to correspondingly coloured squares of paper outside the box. They confirmed Byrne's conclusion, that the innards of this small intruder were those of a mobile telephone with the loudspeaker and microphone removed. But one small enigma remained: a tiny GPS chip and receiver placed diagonally opposite the tightly wound microwave antennae.

"I take it you understand what GPS is?" said C.

"Of course, Sir," said Byrne, slightly offended, "Global Positioning System. I presume you refer to the American system - *Navstar GPS* - as opposed to the Russian *Glonass*. The former consists of twenty one satellites, each of which transmit their coordinates and the time according to their internal clocks. The receiving user calculates his own coordinates from the difference in time between his clock and the transmitted satellite times. Positioning accuracies using this system can be between thirty and one hundred metres, depending upon whether you have military or civilian access and how many satellites you can see from your position. However, the degradation imposed on the civilian frequency can be easily removed with differential and kinematic techniques, giving accuracies of up to ten metres - if your clock is set exactly to the satellite clocks, that is. And then the accuracy can then be further enhanced to under a metre if a doppler effect observation is made; even further still if a land station of known co-ordinates is also used for reference. Shall I go on, sir?"

"No thankyou, 409," C said, "Why don't you apply this vast array of immediate knowledge and estimate the function of this device."

"I can think of only one purpose," said Byrne frankly, "and that is to send its own co-ordinates to whomsoever contacts it. Though why, in

this case, I really can't imagine."

"Yes. That's exactly what we surmised. And exactly the predicament we were left in. We got hold of Cellnet for the number and rang the thing up, which did at least confirm our diagnosis, but left us no more the wiser as to its ultimate purpose. The co-ordinates it gave, incidently, were accurate to well under a centimetre. Well eventually we decided to reassemble the device and watch it. We put it back in its crate and the crate back on the proper shelf, and set up a spy camera to watch it from across the aisle." C took a cassette out of a drawer and walked briskly across the office to a video player and television set up in a corner. "I think you might find this interesting, 409," he said, pushing the tape into the machine.

He switched on the player, and on the screen there appeared a section of storage rack bearing several crates. Everything was still, quiet and dull in the dim lighting of the warehouse. Nothing moved or stirred. No shadows flitted quickly across unwatched patches. No scrapes or whispers escaped the light cover of background hiss. A minute or so passed and Byrne began to wonder what it was he was supposed to be looking for.

Then one of the crates disappeared. It simply vanished. The crate above it seemed to hang in the air for a second, as if gravity had been caught unaware. And then it dropped to the shelf below with a crash. When the echoes had faded away all was still, quiet and dull once more.

Byrne vaulted out of his seat and over to the video player, hitting the rewind button with all sense of decorum wiped aside. He watched the event again. And again. On the fourth time C cleared his throat disapprovingly and Byrne, remembering his company, returned reluctantly to his chair, an awestruck expression on his face.

"A bit far fetched, eh?" said C smugly.

"That's amazing," said Byrne, his eyes still fixed on the screen.

"Quite." C knocked out the contents of his half-smoked pipe and refilled it, without a word. Byrne sat in a stunned silence, trying to sort out the implications that were crowding his head.

"So," said C finally, "Matter transmission. It wasn't long before Weinstein's name appeared. A few other scientists have dabbled with

the idea, but none so much as he. And the initial thefts from France, Germany and Italy naturally suggested Switzerland as the operational base of the thief. We can only assume that he subsequently enhanced the range of his matter transmitter machine in order to steal from us."

"That device in the crate, then," said Byrne, still caught up in those few seconds of video tape, "its purpose was to send its co-ordinates for transmission?"

"So it seems."

"How did it get there?"

"We don't know. Well, presumably someone must have put it there. But that could have been at any time. We're looking into that, of course, but it could be a very long and arduous investigation. You will be taking the more direct route."

"Weinstein," said Byrne.

"Indeed. We're pretty sure he's our man. The Swiss have been their usual bloody minded selves about supplying us with any useful information about him, but we've uncovered a few intriguing snippets. The most notable of these is his recent spending spree. He's become quite a well-known face at auctions in the last few months, buying up impressionist paintings as if his life depended on it. One must naturally wonder where all this money is coming from. When he moved to B  le he had certainly enough to keep him comfortable, but hardly enough to pay for all these purchases. His research - so far as we can tell - is entirely self-funded. He receives no grants or sponsorships and, since he's no longer working for any university, no salary. It's amazing his resources have lasted this long, let alone stretched so far as to allow this extravagance. Then there's his new custom-built house in the Valais, with its own cable car link to Saas Fee. Quite apart from the costs involved - which must have been astronomical - no-one seems to know who built it. The subcontracting on a project as complicated as that must have been enormous, yet the only documentation we've been able to uncover are the deeds for the sale of the land."

"How much money would the stolen arms have raised?" said Byrne.

"Difficult to say. France and Germany are both being cagey over exactly what they lost and how much. No surprise there, of course -

they've always been sick as dogs we won't extend our little friendship with the Americans over the Channel. But, judging from the amount taken from us, it seems extremely unlikely that he got enough to pay for all these things, but then he could be involved in all manner of other dealings that we're unaware of. Drug smuggling, for example, would be an ideal application of his invention. He could have done that for years and we'd never have suspected a thing. Your man Black could be shrimp compared to him. Trout, even."

Byrne ignored the pun. Still he could see that crate disappearing before his eyes. Over and over again he had played back that piece of tape in his head and the wonder refused to go away. What an incredible sight! What an incredible case to have to work on. C's information had been quickly and efficiently slotted into all the appropriate categories and a clear picture had emerged. But it had emerged too easily.

"Isn't he being a bit careless, sir? All this spending - he must have realised it would attract attention?"

"The casual observer of intelligence agencies might well conclude that careless spending is no longer a cause for suspicion," said C dryly, "If Ames could get away with it then why should anyone else have reason to worry?"

"I suppose," Byrne said, "if he's just a scientist, maybe he didn't think." But that face: those had not been the features of an eccentric scientist heedlessly indulging himself. They had been a lot more calculating than that. Why would he have been so absurdly remiss?

And another thing. "Didn't you say, sir, that a, um, 'matter transmitter' had to include a device that could describe the object at the transmitting end?"

C looked faintly impressed. "Yes, 409," he said, "Indeed I did. More precisely, that's what I was told. As I assume you noticed, no such device was discovered in the crate. I put this fact to the young upstart in Technical who took so much pride in bewildering me with the techno-babble I related to you earlier and he helpfully told me that what we had witnessed was therefore impossible. I think we're going to have to turn a blind eye to impossibility here, Richard. Right now we have nothing else to go on."

"And where do I come in then sir?"

"Right. So, as I mentioned, Weinstein's been buying up a lot of impressionist art in the last few months. There's a late Manet to be auctioned off at Southeby's in Zurich next week and it's a fairly safe bet he'll be bidding. When he bids he always bids in person, so he'll be there. You are to bid against him. Now, whether or not you chose to lose - if, of course, you find yourself in such a privileged situation - is entirely up to you. It might interest you to know that, to date, Weinstein has not lost out at an auction once and this has involved, on two occasions, paying ridiculous prices well over the next highest bid. The point is that you will use the occasion to get to know him as well as possible. It's rather a feeble means of acquiring his acquaintance, I know, but he deals with very few people and socialises with even fewer. It will have to do."

"And who am I?"

"Richard Byrne of Byrne and White Workholding Ltd. We'll use the usual cover, I think. Save messing about, and I don't see any reason as to why we shouldn't." C took a Polaroid photograph out of a drawer in his desk and tossed it across to Byrne. "Technical knocked this up for you on their computers. You might like to flash it around or something. That's the vase depicted in the painting. You own it. The painting's hardly a masterpiece, so you've got to have a good reason for wanting it as badly as you'll make out you want it. So you own the vase and your burning ambition, for years, has been also to own the painting. You've saved and saved and saved for this - starved your children half to death and so on. Got it?"

The tall, straight vase was empty and standing on a polished wooden table. Byrne studied it carefully: the vase had something engraved into it, something long and serpentine that snaked down from the top to the bottom of the vase, where its jaws were open and flaming. Some sort of Chinese dragon. He compared it to a print of the painting C gave him now, a still life of the vase with flowers. He had to admit, it was a damned fine likeness.

"Roses and Tulips in a Dragon Vase," said C. "Circa 1882; that's about a year before Manet died. The auction's next Wednesday and you've a flight booked with Swissair for Monday morning. You're to

liaise with head of Z. Use the remaining time to brush up on your Manet. But don't go over the top, 409; you're an engineer, not an art expert. Get a book out of the library, or something. Do you need any more business cards or catalogues running off? No? Well drop by Technical, anyway - I gather they've got their hands on a few of the CIA's suppository escape kits for testing. Don't frown, 409, you might well thank them for it one day. And ask them about matter transmission. You might have more luck with them than I did. Now then; Weinstein... " C frowned. "You're to get as close to him as possible. Once you've confirmed our suspicions you must take whatever action you consider necessary to put his operations to a stop. I don't like this business, 409, I don't like it at all. If it's at all possible, we'd greatly like to talk to professor Weinstein, but, if such a situation does not avail itself to you, remember that we're far more concerned that he doesn't talk to anyone else. Am I making myself clear?"

"Perfectly, sir," said Byrne.

"Good. The Chief of Staff will brief you on the finer details this afternoon, then. That's all, 409. Good luck."

In the company of Mary Adams, whom Byrne had known for just about an hour now, the whole scenario seemed to have regained its 'far fetched' status. Byrne felt faintly ridiculous talking about objects vanishing into thin air and the security risks apparently implied. She listened patiently to his summary, contributing a few nods here and there, but nothing more.

"C's very worried about this case," she said, when finally he finished.

"I know," said Byrne, greatly relieved that her opening remark had not been one of utter scorn, "We've been caught completely unawares with this one."

"The frustrating thing is that we've had Weinstein on records - *because* of his research - ever since he was thrown out of Oxford. Someone obviously thought it through *then*. We've seriously

underestimated him."

"We do that all the time," Byrne said, "that's nothing new - we're too conservative. But this..." He tried to sum up his feelings in words: it was too beyond his comprehension, too difficult, too dangerous; too damn frightening. "If this thing's for real we'd better hope to God we can put a cap on it before it gets completely out of control." Too big. This whole thing was just too big. You could only see little bits of it at a time.

Mary Adams gazed out of the window at the everyday streets below. "I suppose we can all get complacent," she said, "even us. You knew where you were in the cold war. I mean, didn't you?"

"I know what you mean," said Byrne, "things have changed. And I'm not at all sure they've changed for the better. There was just the one big bubble in those days. We could spy on it with satellites, eavesdrop on its conversations, penetrate it and recruit within it. That was our enemy. It almost defined us. Now we have to be everywhere at once. Iraq. Iran. North Korea. China. Lots of little bubbles. Our spy satellites are next to useless because we're no longer looking for huge nuclear arsenals; we're looking for odd cars or boats with atomic bombs in the boot or the hold, manufactured from smuggled Russian uranium. A day trip to London. A cruise along the Thames. The only way we're going to know about it is if someone on the inside's warned us. That means spies are more important now than they've ever been. And the media think that our usefulness is over - how naive and unimaginative they are. Already German customs have intercepted small amounts of uranium at their border - not enough to make an atomic bomb with, no, but very nearly, and what people don't seem to realise is that it only takes a small amount of uranium attached to a conventional explosive to lethally contaminate an area almost as large as London with radioactive dust. These are dangerous, dangerous times. Nuclear proliferation. Terrorism. Chemical and biological weapons being developed in countries that have already declared us their enemies. Why don't people realise how fragile their status quo is?"

"Why should they?" said Mary Adams, "They pay us good money to deal with these threats for them. They've got other things to worry

about. Perhaps they're a little too cynical about our efficacy than we would wish them to be, but that's the price of our secrecy. The government knows we're worthwhile - what was it that Quinlan report concluded? We're a national treasure that must be preserved at all costs. There - what more do you want? Let the press rant and rage all they want, it's not as if we're going to be scrapped or anything. I'm not in this game to be appreciated. We exist now: that's official, and, as far as I'm concerned, that's all the public need know. We rely on them to turn the cogs of normality as much as they rely on us to preserve them. Hysteria won't help anyone." Adams stopped abruptly and looked down. She seemed suddenly embarrassed. "Of course you understand that," she said, "You don't need me to tell you."

Byrne smiled at her. "No, you're quite right," he said, "You caught me feeling hard done by, which is the least useful thing right now. Right then. So what can you tell me about Weinstein that I don't already know?"

She shrugged. "Well," she said, "there's not really all that much I can add. Weinstein is a loner; there's no-one to talk to who knows him. I have a contact at Sotheby's in Zurich who tells me that he's usually very reserved in the auction room. Outside it, though, he has been known to drag complete strangers into deep conversations on the state of society and I'm told he's very forceful and very thorough in his condemnations. He's never married. That's it, really. Oh yes, we've had it confirmed that Weinstein will be bidding on Wednesday morning.

"What time will he be there?"

"He's usually very punctual, apparently. The bidding commences at half past ten so he'll be there around twenty past probably. You should be there for ten. Incidentally, I have found out a little more about this house of his in the Valais. He employs a butler, a maid and a French cook who was one of the top chefs in the Ritz in Paris. This is just for him, mind. I presume he likes his food. I've got some pictures of the house itself." She opened the red folder between them and took out some black and white photographs. "These were taken the day before yesterday. I'm sorry about the quality, but there was no way I could send someone up there in daytime - the place is just too

exposed - so they had to be taken on infra-red film after dark. But they show a fair amount of detail. I've got some satellite pictures through from GCHQ as well..." she hunted through the contents of the folder and found them at the back, "Look - you can see on these how the house is actually built into the mountainside. Lord knows how much that must have cost on its own."

This was the first time Byrne had seen a photograph of the building. Had he been the sort of person whose jaw was prone to dropping at the sight of something fantastic his jaw would indeed have dropped. It was marvellous. It was not so much the size of the building as its majesty which so captivated him, although it was certainly big. He had expected something more along the lines of a large Swiss chalet, perhaps, maybe even something made mostly from concrete. This alpine... *mansion* before him could not possibly have been constructed without anyone noticing. It should have taken years. It should have involved expert engineers and designers and builders, and specialist materials suppliers from all over the world. It should have been the most talked about project in the entire country! Someone, somewhere, *must* have known about it!

He looked harder at the pictures. He found the satellite photographs the most interesting. In front of the house there was a large terrace and from this a pathway led across to the cable car station a few yards away. A figure stood on the edge of the terrace where it met the snow and another on the path just before it reached the station. A third was to one side of the building and from the other three photographs, all of which had been taken within the same minute, Byrne could see that it was following a route around the T-shaped building to the rear, where the base of the T disappeared into the mountain. "Who are these?" he said, pointing them out, "The staff?"

"Possibly," she said, doubtfully, "but their positions suggest that they're guards. Look - this one here," she circled the figure on the terrace with her finger, "can see right the way down the mountainside - almost as far as Saas Fee. The guard by the cable station can watch the cars coming up and survey the east side of the house and the other is watching the west side and the mountain above."

"Where did these men come from then?"

"I don't know," Adams admitted, "Officially it's just Weinstein, the maid, the butler and the chef up there. You've got good eyesight," she added, "I didn't notice they were men."

Byrne grinned at this. "Sorry," he said, "I guess I'm as guilty as the rest of them for my stereotyping?"

"You'll do." She smiled. "Anyway, you're probably right. I expect they are men. Bit of an odd security though, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you think it's rather lax? For who we think he is, I mean? The only other measure is a barbed wire fence around his perimeter. The job those men do could have been achieved by a few video cameras, and - think about it - that would have avoided attracting any attention. And he certainly has the funds to afford it."

Yes, thought Byrne, how true. What was he playing at? Suddenly, the strange sense of *déjà vu* was back; somehow he thought he had an explanation for this. But all the other mingled thoughts of his mind smothered and killed this brief sensation before he had a chance to grasp it. He sighed. He shut his eyes. The after-image of the scene burned in front of him in faded neon colours and he fancied he could make out the three men as tiny, green blobs. Was it his imagination, or were they looking up at him; up, into the sky, into the heavens, where the silent eye passed swiftly?

"I think," he said to Mary Adams, "that Professor Weinstein is up to something very cunning indeed. I'm damned if I know what, but I will. And I don't think I'm going to like it one little bit."

CHAPTER THREE

IN ZURICH, WITH MARY

THE DREAM was back, but it was only now that he remembered. In waking hours he was free from its clutch, but now he felt as if he had never been away.

Leaden legs. Such a cliché, but these things are rarely apparent at the time and place. Retrospection, perhaps, provides the appropriate irony, but only if one remembers. He was in the dark, running towards a pinpoint of bright, white light and hands were getting closer: cold, clammy hands that he could not see, only he felt them brushing against him, stretching out, reaching for his throat; desperate hands that wanted to crush the breath out of him. He had to run towards the light. It was hot and wet, he could see; scalding hot. But bright. He plunged in and it felt like his skin being ripped away from his body, like the flesh and sinew that remained being soaked in an acid bath. He screamed.

He awoke.

For several seconds Byrne remained totally still and silent. The last snatches of the dream dissolved quickly away as he automatically began to take in his surroundings. Then it was gone.

What had woken him? He strained his senses for foreign sounds - breathing, perhaps, or the faint rustle of clothing. There were none. He turned over and grunted, as if turning in his sleep, and under this cover his right hand slipped up and under his pillow to the reassuring coldness of the Browning there. He lay quiet again. Still no noise.

In one violent movement he jumped out of the bed and stabbed on his bedside lamp. Swiftly his gun swept the room from left to right and back again. It was empty and untouched. He let his breath out slowly and sat back down on the side of the bed. Odd, he thought,

damnably odd.

Byrne reached for his cigarettes and lit one, then he got up and went to the window to look outside. The street below was quiet and very lightly washed in a hint of dawn. He was not due up yet for another hour and a half, but he hardly felt like going back to bed. So he rang for breakfast and took a cold shower whilst the food was being prepared. The icy water was good and he came out in a much brighter mood. He exercised solidly for fifteen minutes, performing three rounds of fifty press-ups and fifty sit-ups, by the end of which his muscles were in trembling submission. Then, with a few calming breaths, he moved into a solid defence posture and stood for a while, finding his focus. Kata, the art of simulated attack, is as much concerned with relaxation and meditation as it is with exercise: every block, every punch, every kick has to be performed inch by inch, detail by detail, so that the whole move may be understood. Ideally the dust in the air should be left undisturbed through this smooth ritual of control. Byrne went through the opening blocks of the first kata and then moved into the punches. He found his mind settling.

Breakfast came in the form of two grilled rashers of bacon beside scrambled eggs and mushrooms, also plenty of toast, a tumbler full of chilled, fresh orange juice and a big pot of black coffee, which he finished completely. By eight o'clock Byrne was in an excellent mood. He opened up the windows fully and sat back to listen to the sounds of Zurich waking up, with another cigarette. It was two hours before he was due to meet Mary Adams, leaving him an hour and a half before it was time to leave the hotel. He spent a while re-reading the notes he had made on Edouard Manet. Then he browsed through a few prints he had bought in London: the scandalous *Dèjeuner sur l'Herbe* and *Olympia*, with their contemporary nudes, his own personal favourite, *The Races at Longchamp* and then the famous *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. Then he thought about Mary Adams and yesterday's evening on lake Zurich: a fondue cruise, it had been her idea. A smile crept across his face as he remembered and he tossed the forgotten notes onto his bed. She really was quite something, Byrne thought. So independent. So friendly. So genuine. She had just the right way of putting things. He was looking forward to seeing

her again. And, barring a lunch appointment, today promised to be a day of leisure, during which Mary had proposed to show Byrne the sights. Ordinarily he would have recoiled at such a prospect, but thoughts of the day ahead were turning out to be surprisingly favourable.

He did a bit of window shopping on his way to the meeting point. Zurich, naturally, is better known for its business than its tourism, so there were very few of the dreadful souvenir shops he had so despised in Interlaken; no shop windows filled with elaborate, rustic carvings, Swiss army knives and keepsake novelty cowbells. Nonetheless his ambling predicament quickly brought the memory of that holiday and its ambition back to him. Still, his life was more interesting now, was it not? Exciting, to say the least. No case could last forever, of course, but... He watched a few shopkeepers arriving and unlocking their doors, yawning. He wondered how they could stand the mundane monotony of their lives.

He met Mary Adams at a small cafe looking on to the Limmatquai. In fact, his impatience had brought him to the rendezvous point a few minutes early. He sat down at a free table and watched a blue and white tram pull up a few yards away. Adams jumped out with a spring in her step.

As an opening remark, Byrne said to her, "You're trusting, putting your faith in public transport."

She laughed and replied, "If you knew Switzerland at all you wouldn't even think of saying that. Everything's punctual here: everything and everyone. Look:" She held out her watch for him to see. "Eight fifty four... exactly." The tram dinged twice and moved off.

Byrne feigned wistful eyes. "Oh for some good old British lethargy," he said.

"Well, whatever your fancy!"

A waitress came over and they ordered espresso coffee.

"If you ask me," Adams continued, "anyone who misses English organisation must enjoy moaning."

Byrne rose to this deliberately. "Not at all!" he protested, "I'll readily admit that we could do things more efficiently from time to

time, but I wouldn't wish for this - it's so sterile, so characterless, so boring!"

"Sounds like a moan to me."

"There's more to life than order."

She laughed. "Yes, very profound," she said, "but I don't think the Swiss would disagree. Their philosophy is very much geared towards dealing with *disorder* - in as organised a way as possible, of course. I shouldn't have to exemplify - not to you - but take, for example, the permanent state of military preparation to defend Swiss neutrality. How many countries do you know that would trust every man in the land with a rifle and ammunition in his home? In their everyday lives these people may well be wrapped up in their rules and regulations, but in their hearts they're free. They value their stability because they realise how precious it is. They are prepared. Weren't you ever in the Scouts?"

"I was not," Byrne said stiffly, "Actually I was in the Boys' Brigade."

"Oh, pardon me. Well then, you'll appreciate discipline."

"*Discipline* yes. Absolutely. Wholeheartedly. Oh yes, alright, I applaud the Red Cross and I respect the Swiss neutrality. And they make damned fine cuckoo clocks and very pretty little houses. But that's it. End of story. No art, no music, no famous Swiss temperament. The French are passionate, the Italians are aggressive, the Germans are arrogant; the Swiss, I'm afraid, are just boring."

"No art?" repeated Adams, "No art? Their whole system is a *work* of art!"

"That's just a figure of speech. I mean *art* art."

"Don't you find beauty in order? Don't you find it... satisfying?"

"You say that," Byrne said, "because it's all a novelty still. You're too used to living in England. In a year's time you'll be bored with it, because there's nothing else. A year. Maybe less."

Adams laughed again. "You patronising bastard! How do you know what it's like? I love living in Switzerland. The Swiss are intelligent, responsible, caring, concerned people. They don't moan and gossip incessantly - of course if one enjoyed these things I suppose he or she *might* find their company less than inspiring..."

Byrne raised his hands in mock defeat. "Ok," he said, "I give up. You're right - I love it here!"

He liked Mary Adams.

The waitress returned with some excellent espresso: hot and thick and bitterly strong. Byrne found that the last thing he wanted to talk about was the case. He waited for her to bring the subject up, but she did not; she talked about Zurich instead. Presently they left. They took a bridge across the Limmat and walked down Bahnhofstrasse, the famous shopping street that runs from the railway station to the northern tip of lake Zurich. Adams was a fine guide. She pointed out the elegant shops: Gucci, Saint-Phil, Vilan, Hofman clocks, Cartier Jewellery, Charles Jourdan shoes and the giant Franz Carl Weber toy store. She pointed out the banks. This was the most important business centre in the entire country, she told him; under their very feet were bank vaults full of gold, she told him. Byrne took the information in, but not in the cold, calculating way with which he normally sorted detail. All of this pleasant trivia was happily stored away in the section of his mind reserved for her. She had told him, and that would be the most salient fact recorded.

At the bottom of Bahnhofstrasse they walked through Burkliplatz and across the Limmat again via the Quaibrücke, the bridge that defines the end of the Limmat and the start of lake Zurich. On the other side they walked along the Utoquai promenade towards the gardens and mansions of Seefeldquai, the opera house and the Jacobs-Suchard coffee museum. A few of Zurich's fashionable finest strolled gracefully by, and mixed among them romantic couples walked arm in arm or hand in hand: Genevan businessmen with their Zurich mistresses, Byrne's cynicism told him, yet they looked peaceful and happy here, if a little shy, and he couldn't help but feel jealous of them.

They sat down on a bench at the foot of a lime tree. Adams lounged back on the seat, resting her head on the curl at the top so that her hair hung straight down behind it. She was wearing jeans and a white pullover today, and a simple gold necklace that, absently, she played with now, winding and unwinding it around her right index finger. Thoughtfully she gazed across the lake at the Mythenquai opposite,

her free hand waving away the occasional fly; in the broken shards of sunlight that danced across her, as the branches above swayed gently in the breeze, she looked, Byrne considered, quite lovely.

"What happened with that Romanian business you were involved in?" she asked absently, "I read something about that last night."

Romania, thought Byrne. It could have been ten years ago. The Swiss sparkle seemed somehow to make that grimy country impossible. "Oh, that," he said. "A bit of a mess that was really. Thought the old man was going to throw the book at me once and for all for a while. I was probably lucky this case came along when it did." He recounted the tale, slowly, drawing out this moment with Mary as far as it would go. She seemed to watch the story unfold in front of her, somewhere above the lake: the enquiries, the little paper trail, the dirty little bar in Remeti, the fish farm, the meeting with Ivanescu. Byrne left Ciara Kelly out. He described the next day's journey into Oradea and his subsequent three hour wait at an empty restaurant table. A bottle of *Mulfatlar* had helped the first, mostly optimistic, hour to pass. Then his hopes had begun to fade. The last hour had been out of desperation. He had checked everything, even his watch in the end. This was the Select restaurant, wasn't it? Yes sir. There weren't any other restaurants called 'Select' in Oradea? No sir. Well were there any other rooms in this restaurant? No sir. A smile. Just the kitchen, sir. Byrne's pride had cut in at that point and informed him that enough was enough. Even so, he had spent the next hour in the small restaurant immediately opposite the Select, at a window seat, eating greasy *sarmale* hungrily and watching, just in case.

He had decided to risk a return to Remeti and Ivanescu, to demand an explanation. But then, Byrne had thought later, as his taxi slid its way through the mountains, it was, after all, absolutely the right of an employer to keep a prospective employee waiting a little; waiting a lot, even. And maybe the missed meeting had been an entirely innocent, entirely unavoidable consequence of any number of unforeseen intrusions into the schedule. Perhaps they were waiting for his return right now.

Byrne said to Mary Adams, "Of course I really should know better

by now not to be so naively optimistic. When I got back to Remeti the fish farm was completely deserted. I was on my way to the bar, hoping they just might not have got back yet themselves, when someone took a few shots at me from a passing Dacia. So then I knew. Personally, I think Black must have realised who I was some time after he'd given the go ahead for our meeting - later on that night perhaps, when it was too late to stop me from getting in touch with London. All he could have told Ivanescu would have been to clear out and to pay me off for my interference. Well, I commandeered a horse drawn cart that was approaching and got after them. We had quite a scenic little chase through the valley. The ice on the road got them in the end - they tried to take a corner too fast. The car went up before I had a chance to get either of them out: all that petrol they carry about in the boot in jerry cans, you know - creates one hell of an explosion. So that was that, really. There was nothing more I could do. And my horses had been scared off by the bang, so I had to walk the best part of the way to the nearest station."

Adams laughed. Byrne wondered how she had witnessed the scene. "I suppose you must be quite bored with all of this," she said.

"With what?" said Byrne.

"With this: Zurich, Switzerland; today. It's hardly your kind of lifestyle, is it?"

"No," Byrne said, "no, I'm not bored at all."

"Well look, you must have some interest in Switzerland or why would you take your holiday here?"

"I thought the mountains might do me some good," he said vaguely. "At the time. But the thing with mountains is, well, you look at them... and that's it."

"You don't like walking?"

"No. I've never been much of a walker. It bores me. If you want to get from A to B and there's no other method of transportation then fine - like me in Romania, for example. But walking for the sake of walking... I suppose if it gives other people pleasure then that's great, but it's not for me." And yet now, in her presence, these words seemed slightly false. Deceptive even. The prospect of a carefree trek across rugged scenery, with her for company, was undeniably

appealing. Even the discordant clashing of cowbells seemed a potentially aesthetic bonus.

"I like walking," she said, "but not on my own. Except for sometimes. How do you relax then?"

"I play cards," Byrne said, searching his memory, "I read. Umm... sometimes I listen to music."

"What sort of books do you read?"

"Non-fiction mostly. The occasional thriller."

"What sort of music?"

"Well, that depends on what sort of mood I'm in. What do you like?"

"Oh I like all sorts. So long as it's on vinyl. CDs lack something, somehow, and cassettes sound dull and lifeless."

"Do you really think so?"

She ignored the sarcasm, or was unaware of it, and sat up eagerly. "Oh yes," she said, "there's something about a record: the crackle as the needle goes down, the mechanical clunk as the arm goes home. It's all sort of... musty and warm and reassuring. CDs are too shiny and sterile, and that whizzing noise - you know, when you put a disc in for the first time - it's... empty... you know what I mean? Too harsh and tinny. Too fast. Too efficient. Music shouldn't be like that."

"I'd never really thought about it like that," Byrne said. Mainly, he supposed, because he never really listened to music. Whenever it was on he would be doing other things: getting changed, perhaps; eating; cleaning out his gun. He rarely listened to music for the sake of listening to music. He rarely read for the sake of reading, come to that. Most of the time when he read it would be in preparation for a case and on those few occasions when he did venture into the forgetful world of fiction it would only be to while away a dull moment, certainly never because he actually desired to do so. In fact, Byrne rarely relaxed for the sake of relaxing. In fact, Byrne rarely relaxed.

Except that he was relaxed now, in Zurich, with Mary. He was relaxed and happy and wondering how his companion could possibly be a part of MI6, wondering how someone so at peace with herself could be involved with an organisation whose very heart was soaked

in the most profound cynicism. But he was relaxed. And he was in no doubt as to his feelings for Mary Adams: with her the blandest moments came to life and danced colourfully; with her there was yet hope in the world. Cliché has to come from somewhere and he had reached that point of origin he had always assumed to be the naive creation of an overly idealistic mind: Byrne was suddenly in love in a way he never had been before. It was not a burning desire to be with her, to be seen with her, to sleep with her and to conquer her; neither was it a need to be taken care of by her, to have his worries soothed away by a motherly stroke or embrace from her. He just loved her. He loved her as she was for who she was. Right now he had absolutely no desire to reveal this, no desire even to think about revealing this or, worse still, to embark upon the agonising path of mental debate as to whether his feelings towards her might just possibly be reciprocated; there was a case ahead, a case barely a day ahead, the difficulty and danger of which had yet to be established, and, as always, he had to accept that he might not make it through this time. He had to. But this time he could not help but feel resentful. This time he felt as though there might be something worth making it through for. This time he considered that life after the dreaded promotion might just be worth living, if it could only be lived with her.

In this singular moment of introspection Byrne saw at last that the pursuit of the pointless is not in itself of absolute pointlessness. He saw at last that everything does not have to be the means to a practical end. In his many years of maturation he had never once doubted his scorn for the trivial pursuits of the masses. Collecting worthless objects, watching television 'entertainment', following sports players or teams and so on had always seemed remarkable wastes of time and money to him. The more active hobbies, such as painting, gardening and *playing* sport he had more respect for on the grounds that they involved a degree of self-enhancement and skill, yet even then he would question whether those skills were ever actually going to be of any real use, other than within the activity itself. The argument that these pursuits were worthwhile for the pleasure they brought alone had never seemed anything more than an attempt to justify shameful

self-indulgence and lazy distraction from the real issues of life.

"I suppose," he said to Adams, "CDs never did go with candlelight."

She smiled at him. "There you are," she said, "so you do understand."

An hour or so later they were seated in a small restaurant tucked away in one of the tiny streets clustered around Bellevueplatz. They were awaiting the arrival of Walter Bergantin, an Italian administrator working at Sotheby's of Zurich, who was to be supplying them with tickets and a programme for the next day's auction. They waited for about twenty minutes, chatting on hungry stomachs. Adams was just explaining his absence away with a sweeping generalisation on Italian time-keeping when, with a screech of brakes and an angry horn blast, his arrival was announced. They looked out of the window to see a small, tightly built man in his early forties smack his head furiously at the car that had emergency stopped for him. He screamed an Italian obscenity at the pale-faced driver, flapping his arms about him like some sort of demented bird. Then, in a flash, his aggression was gone and he sauntered cheerily into the restaurant.

"Mary!" he cried, "You stupid bloody English - why you no eat?" He kissed her on both cheeks and wrung Byrne's hand thoroughly before falling into the chair between them. "I'm sorry, but I am detained."

"Walter, you really should look both ways before you cross the road," said Mary, a broad smile on her face.

"Pah!" Bergantin waved the very notion away with contempt, "Rules rules, bloody rules. This country makes me want vomit." His eyes darted over to Byrne. "Hello mister, I am Walter Bergantin. At your service!"

"Walter," said Mary, "this is Richard Byrne, the client I was telling you about."

"Mister Byrne, of course. You try to buy the flower painting tomorrow, yes?"

"I intend to," said Byrne.

"Oh, is good your - how you say... motivation. I hope you have more money!"

Just about the appropriate amount of sitting down time had elapsed; a waitress came over. Bergantin ordered zürchertopf, speciality, he explained, of Zurich, and Byrne, not to be outdone, went for his own favourite local dish of geschnetzeltes. They shared a bottle of Blauburgunder between them. Adams ordered trout and a glass of Riesling-Sylvaner. When all this was done Bergantin pulled out a crumpled packet of Gauloises *sans filtres* and offered them around, then lit up with a contented sigh.

"I am sorry, mister Byrne," he said, spitting smoke out with each syllable; a habit Byrne frowned upon at the best of times, least of all when it was accompanied by the rancid stench of the French tobacco, "because I know this painting is important for you. But please understand - one man who is bid tomorrow is very very rich, and I think maybe is possible he is have the painting."

"Really?" said Byrne, taking time to untangle the broken sentence, "And his name would be?"

"Weinstein. He is - how you say - yank. Bloody rich yank."

"Well that's interesting." Byrne tried to sound intrigued. "He's come all the way from America to buy this painting? I didn't realise it was so valuable."

"Ah! No, mister Byrne. No, I am sorry. He is live in Switzerland, not America. But what you say is true - this flower painting is interest only someone who is collect Manet paintings or maybe impressionist paintings that have the flowers. You understand? Is no masterpiece."

Byrne brought a Marlboro to life, hoping it might go some way towards fighting off the Gauloises. "This Weinstein chap then," he said, "What does he collect?"

Bergantin sighed. He looked somewhat confused. "Is collect impressionist paintings," he said finally; rather helplessly, it seemed. He pulled hard on his cigarette. "I no understand - I no think *he* is understand. Is have no pattern - is buy impressionist this, impressionist that - Manet, Monet, Renoir - but this, to me, is similar go the music shop and just buy the popular music because is pop music. Is superficial pattern - how you say - token gesture. The

serious collector is like something more... specific. For me, mister Byrne, this painting is no very interesting, but I understand why is good you have - is good reason why you want: is come from the heart, yes? But Weinstein, I think, is want for another reason..." Bergantin's hands froze in mid air, in a gesture of ignorance. "What, mister Byrne? I don't know. So I am sorry for if you have big disappointment tomorrow."

"I sincerely hope I'm not disappointed tomorrow," Byrne said, "my family has wanted this painting for generations. What does this fellow do then, that he has so much money?"

"That, mister Byrne, I do not know. He says he is a scientist, but nothing more. I think maybe he is work for the government and is necessary this work is secret. So maybe this money is what I give for the tax. But this is, uh, speculate - no, excuse me, *speculation*. Please, mister Byrne, I have curiosity with this vase. You have, maybe, a picture?"

Byrne nodded eagerly. Keen to test the computer composite's plausibility he retrieved the photograph, saying, "You know about glass?"

"A little, mister Byrne, a little. Ah, yes, I see. Your family is take good care of this, yes? This is good. And who do you think is make this?"

"I can only speak for my father. He thinks it's Baccarat."

"Yes, indeed this is possible. I see other glass before, with the oriental picture, from Cristalleries de Baccarat. Perhaps it is made about 1878, if this is correct. But is also possible this vase is Bohemian. Hmm..." The Italian held the photograph close and scrutinised it fastidiously. "The cutting is a little coarse... Well, I am no expert. Thank you, mister Byrne." He returned the photograph.

"What do you mean by that?" said Byrne quickly, "What do you mean, 'the cutting is a little coarse'?"

"Please, mister Byrne, I no want offend - I like your vase."

"No no. I'm not offended. What I mean is..." Byrne paused to think of a way of phrasing his concern casually. "What I mean is, um, I'm just curious as to why you find the cut unusual. You know far more about these things than I do."

"Oh, mister Byrne, maybe I am talk - how you say - bollocks. When I see the painting I am think just that Manet is exaggerate this dragon, so is easy see in the picture. This is how the impressionist is paint, yes? But here I see the vase is very similar and this is surprise me. This is all. Nothing more."

"Oh, I see," Byrne said, mentally cursing Technical as he spoke. Of course they had interpreted the painting as a literal image of the vase, rather than an impression, which it obviously was. Too much technical expertise and not enough common sense. Well, he would just have to make sure he didn't show the photograph too frequently.

This pause for thought lost him control of the conversation. Already Bergantin was talking excitedly about his forthcoming return to Venice in a few weeks, for the carnival, whereupon he would be driving one of his brother's taxis for a fortnight and milking as much lira from the "bloody stupid tourists" as possible. Byrne tried to reintroduce the subject of Weinstein, the auction, the painting several times, in the hope that he might yet glean some extra information, but it was to no avail. The closest he got was with his conversational proposal that Venice itself was an enormous work of *impressionist* art, to which Bergantin agreed wholeheartedly, commenting on the irony that parts of Venice smelled like shit and looked like shit, but were still considered beautiful. So Byrne gave up. And then the food came, and with this the Italian's mood brightened even more. He laughed and joked with Mary, proposing numerous toasts, to which he chinked his glasses of blauburgunder (and his subsequent glasses of kirsch) with a vengeance. Byrne watched him enviously, for Bergantin's vivacity brought Adams unexpectedly to life, drawing even the occasional expletive from her lips. He felt suddenly intimidated and then increasingly out of place. He began to wonder if she was ignoring him and for what possible reason. Had he been annoyingly egotistical in his earlier narrative of the case in Romania? Too nonchalant, perhaps? Too arrogant? Was this her way of punishing him? He watched closely for her references to his existence. They were solely occasional looks in his direction, made as she laughed at another of the Italian's punch lines - was she sharing the moment with him or was she checking up on him, investigating

Byrne's ability to let another man take the limelight? Or was she acknowledging his presence only because she felt obliged to, because she was his nanny for the day and had to humour him? Byrne began to feel bitter. Who the hell was she to judge him? And what in Christ's name did she think she was doing, playing her girlie little games in professional time? He was seized by a sudden desire to point out to her that this was exactly why employers had always preferred men to women. Damn her. Damn her manipulations. And damn all that true love guff he had entertained earlier; Byrne felt a fool for that now.

He grew cold and silent. He decided to chain-smoke for half an hour and measure the average number of words she offered him per cigarette. Evidence, thought Byrne; proof that he wasn't imagining things, though he doubted it would become a quoted statistic. And two could play at this game - he could ignore her too. Byrne reflected smugly that he was just a little too experienced to be beaten by a tactic as transparent as this. If he knew his women (and Byrne liked to think that he did) she would be thinking right now that men (bloody men) never did have so much as a finger's worth of psychological insight into the female mind and mentality. She would find his defiant silence pathetic, no doubt, but he would wait for that inevitable U-turn in affection employed by all good bitches - that sudden warmth and niceness, perhaps, or that gently phrased concern, where resistance is in evidence, tinted with just about the right amount of assumed intimacy to make the victim feel both stupid and guilty at once for his behaviour - he would wait for that moment and then he would excuse himself to prepare for tomorrow's work: an unbreakable excuse and one which would hint pointedly at her own standard of professionalism. Byrne would make it casually, matter-of-factly, as if it was quite an obvious thing to say. He might even feign a faint embarrassment at having to insinuate her misdemeanour. The longer she left it, then, the better: the more justified he would be; the less complaint she would be able to have; the more stupid she would look in her own hindsight.

Byrne's sulk was interrupted by Bergantin excusing himself and his bladder temporarily, so that Adams had to talk to him then. "What do

you think of Walter?" she asked, "He makes me laugh. I feel quite guilty about deceiving him sometimes."

"It's our job to deceive people," said Byrne, angry that he was not yet through his first cigarette.

"Is it?" she seemed a little taken aback by this. "I thought it was our job to protect our country."

"Our country's *interests*."

"Well, whatever. I suppose it depends on your perspective."

What the hell is that supposed to mean? thought Byrne. *What's wrong with my damned perspective?* Time to go. He packed away his cigarettes and stood up. "I really should be going," he said, injecting a modest awkwardness into the words, "I must do some preparation for tomorrow. It's been a lovely morning. Thanks. Of course, I'd love to stay and chat, but... " *You know how it is*, said his raised eyebrows, *it's just a harmless long lunch to you; it could be the difference between life and death to me*.

Mary looked satisfyingly shocked. "Oh," she said, "Of course. Yes, you must go if you think you need the time. I'm sorry, I thought you were - you should have said something. Must you go right now?" She glanced nervously in the direction that Bergantin had taken, and Byrne knew it would be appallingly rude if he did leave now, rather than wait the few minutes for the Italian's return. He gave her a few extra moments, asking if there was anything she wanted to go over before tomorrow. "No," she replied, looking upset and confused. "I'm waiting on a call to say Weinstein's left Saas Fee. It was possible he might have been staying in Zurich tonight, but that looks doubtful now. It doesn't matter. Well... Do your plans for the day extend to the night?"

Byrne's plans were to get unashamedly drunk at his hotel bar and to pick up some little tart and sweep away his bruised feelings in bed with her. But he told Mary Adams that he didn't know. It would depend. He might call her, perhaps. Possibly.

He walked until he was out of sight of the restaurant and then he stopped. The nagging doubt that he'd first felt as he'd stood to leave, that he had stifled immediately or rather tried to stifle, had grown into a wave of guilt and self-condemnation over the last few footsteps.

How sad she had looked, thought Byrne, how confused she had seemed. Hers had not been the eyes of evil plans thwarted. If he doubled back now he might just make it back to the table before Bergantin and save her from embarrassment. For a minute he seriously contemplated the idea, but his cynicism wasn't gone from him long. It returned savagely, suddenly, as if enraged by the goings on in two minutes of its absence. No. There was no joy in comfort, only naivety. No joy in stability, only boredom. No joy in romance; no joy in a woman by his side always. Always. The only joy was in the thrill. The only joy was in the moment of uncertainty of life or of death. He had lived like this for too long to change.

The human mind is devilishly cunning in its rationalisations; it can dress up, hide and overcomplicate the most simple of fears with astonishing flair. Uncertainty was not the issue at risk here, for it was uncertainty, in fact, that was scaring him. Stability was not the menace to be thwarted, for his life, though dramatic, was stable. Byrne was frightened of rejection and he was frightened of change, and, in the manner of the masses, he had mistaken his own personal parameters as evidence of his exemption from such downright normality. The truth was there, in the back of his mind, but Byrne was not the sort of person inclined to look for it. He made his way back up the Bahnhofstrasse feeling happy in his decisiveness. All he had actually done was to choose to maintain the status quo yet again.

CHAPTER FOUR

ROSES AND TULIPS IN A DRAGON VASE

THE BLOOD of his work surrounded him, but there was no time to dwell on that. He had to assemble the LAME now, whilst he still had time. Under the dead gaze of the guard he prised the soles of his shoes off with the same knife he had used to cut the man's face into pieces. He picked out the putty within and replaced the soles. He took off his watch and opened up the back. He moulded the two lumps of explosive together and pushed the resulting single lump into the back of the watch. He pressed the light button three times in quick succession and the word 'LAME' appeared on the digital display.

It was ready. He tucked the miniature explosive into his pocket and pulled the pistol out of the dead man's grip. Slowly he crept out of the room and onto the landing, down the landing, down the stairs into the hallway. So far so good. But the front door, of course, was locked.

He was halfway through the second noisy bolt when the butler came out of the dining room. The old man gave a shrill cry and shot out of sight with surprising speed. He fired, but too slowly, and the bullet flew through the empty space where the butler had stood to shatter a plate on the far side of the room. He cursed and hurried home the last two bolts. And the door opened.

He ran out into the chilly air, down the steps and across the floodlit terrace. Halfway across the terrace an alarm started to scream at him and, by the time he'd reached the snow, this piercing blast of a noise had been joined by men's voices shouting to and at one another. It was a cloudy night, he tried to remember the lie of the land. How far did he have to go for the ridge? Fifty yards? A hundred? But then the need to guess disappeared as everything appeared under the bright scarlet glare of a drifting flare. The light was almost blinding,

but he stumbled on, knee high through the brittle snow.

Gunfire. The white around him, or rather the pink, erupted in little explosions as badly placed bullets flew by. He tried to vary his path, but every detour lost him precious seconds on the ridge that would cover him. His legs were already exhausted from his gay prance in and out of the snow, but he hardly noticed; his adrenalin powered him on. Fifty yards or so now, and closing.

A motor started up on the terrace. And another. And another. He risked a glance behind him to see three men on snowbikes charging after him, their guns held out in front of them like jousting knights. They were closing fast, but he was nearly there. Just another few yards... Just another few feet...

He leapt over the ridge and allowed the new gradient to roll him down to a good distance. He pulled the LAME out of his pocket and pressed the light button two more times. '10' appeared on the display, to be replaced, a second later, by '9'. He sprinted away, the numbers in his head almost drowning in the roar of the bikes that filled the valley air with darkness. He sprinted across the mountainside, parallel to the ridge. He threw himself down, into the snow.

Two. One. Zero.

No explosion, of course. For now the mine was waiting. Waiting for the doppler shift of any passing object. He dared a peek out of his icy trench and saw the bikes fly over the ridge. For one terrible moment he feared the snow might have got into the ultrasonic circuitry within the watch...

But then the bang came, and with it a flash and a fountain of snow. Men and metal were scattered. He wasted no time. He got back on his feet and ran to the nearest casualty. The man on the bike was still struggling to regain his senses, he pushed him off and righted the machine, and mounted it.

The steering was slightly out, but the bike was still working. He shot off down the mountainside under the dying light of the flare. It had worked. He was free.

Byrne awoke feeling oddly liberated, which he finally decided to attribute to the naked form beside him. He wasn't sure why. Her presence in the bed was entirely due to her drunken susceptibility to his equally drunken persuasiveness the previous night. Actually, he felt quite guilty about that.

He took a quick shower under ice cold water and dressed. The big day. As he was lacing up his shoes he felt a strange desire to check the condition of his Local Area Movement Explosive, a handy little gadget devised by Technical, the components of which were concealed within his shoes and his watch. And as he prised off the soles of his shoes the dream came back to him momentarily. He contemplated its meaning for a few seconds, then hastily replaced the soles as whatever her name was stirred in her sleep, and the dream faded quickly away.

Now here was a predicament. Byrne wondered whether to wake her or not. Frankly he had no desire for any aversive repercussions, today of all days. She was lying face down on the bed, tantalisingly, the swell of her left breast bulging beneath her and the accompanying arm draped across the space he had occupied. But she was just plain. Eventually he took his notes out of his suitcase and burned them in the bathroom, with the window wide open. Then he wrote her a short letter in which he explained his absence away with business and wished her all the best for the future. Then he left. In the hotel foyer below he stopped only to ask that the girl's breakfast be added to his bill.

He took a long route to Sothebys, breakfasting on rolls and coffee in a small cafe en route. When he reached the auction house, at quarter past nine, he walked into the luxurious main foyer where a collection of bidders to be were gathered around a closed circuit television screen. Byrne wandered into the group and glanced up at the screen long enough to note that the auctioneer was currently welcoming bids for lot 23, then he turned around, taking them all in in this brief inspection, and retraced his steps to some seats near the entrance. He sat down, took his programme out and pretended to read it.

Their number did not include Weinstein, then. Well that was hardly

surprising; there was over an hour yet before the painting went on sale. Byrne wondered how his eventual arrival would be. The man, after all, was well-known in this building. Would his stride through the entrance be an arrogant one; a quick jog up the few steps outside and then a good, firm, clack clack clack across the marble floor? Smiles? Winks? American pseudery? Or would his presence be a cold and indifferent one - the face of the man that had dominated the collection of photographs Byrne had looked through in C's office? He could imagine that. He could imagine the scientist entering and hardly noticing a human occupation of the room - the final photograph didn't seem to contravene that idea somehow. Weinstein would be bored by the men clustered around the screen, it would amuse him to ignore them. It would amuse him to ignore them, more precisely, in the very place that they meant something. An arrogance of a different kind, Byrne supposed. Passive arrogance, perhaps.

Inevitably, his thoughts moved on to Mary Adams and the idiotic way he had behaved yesterday. Just thinking of it made something within him recoil. Might she still keep the casual arrangement they had made yesterday morning? Nine thirty, for coffee and luck, she had said. Byrne glanced at the entrance, where the day's glorious sun pierced the interior in a thick shaft of silver dust. He hoped she would come.

And come, as it happened, she did. But the worried look on her face told Byrne she had not come out of friendship. As she stood, bathed in the sunlight, seeking him out from the doorway, Byrne knew immediately that something was wrong.

"Hi," she said, when she found him, "Look, I don't want to alarm you, but I still haven't had that 'phone call yet."

"What call?" said Byrne. Then he remembered. "Weinstein's not left Saas Fee?" She shook her head. "Oh that's just great. Don't tell me he's dropped out."

"I don't know," she said.

"Are you sure he's there? I mean, was he definitely seen going in?"

Adams glared at him. "Yes, I did think it would be a good idea to ascertain he was actually there before watching for him to leave."

"Sorry," Byrne said. "What are they watching? The house?"

"No," she said, "they're watching the lower cable station - as I said, the mountain's too exposed to get too close to the house. But that's the only way he'd come. That's the only way he can come."

She took a mobile telephone out of her bag and called up a number. "I'd better check," she said, "to see if there's been any development... Hi Bob, it's Mary. How are you?... How's the baby?... Really? What was that all about then? Ok. Yeah. Well let me know when he wakes, ok? Bye then."

She frowned. "No change," she said, "but..."

"What?"

"Some activity this morning apparently. Gun shots. A flare. About five o'clock. Damn, I wish they had been closer. But he's still up there, anyway."

That was that, then. "Let's get out of here," said Byrne, craving nicotine, "I need some coffee."

They left Sothebys and walked the short distance to the nearest cafe. Byrne, furiously, his blood pounding in his head to the rhythm of his feet, tried to work out what his next move would be. Breaking into the mountainside house had to be an absolute last resort, yet whatever event it was that had broken Weinstein's apparently treasured routine might represent a considerable advance in the seriousness of the whole situation. Gunshots. Flares. It didn't sound too good. He went over the satellite photographs again in his mind and decided he would need to go at night. He would need to approach from the side, the righthand side, when facing the house; the side guarded by the man who walked back and forth, along its flank. At the rear, where the house met the mountain, this guard would be out of sight of the other two. Byrne would have to ascend some distance away, then make his way along, towards the house, and somehow take the guard out at this point. But then what, exactly? When the other two didn't see their colleague come back into view at the proper time they would raise the alarm. No. Hopeless. There had to be another way. There had to be a legitimate way onto the man's land that might see him through the front door, if only for a few minutes. An accident on his slopes, perhaps. Skiing. Hang-gliding. Yes, the latter of those might just work, he thought. He could glide

over and crash on Weinstein's land, then ask for help from the owner. That would get him the chance...

They were entering the cafe and Adams was still talking about the auction, as if there was yet life in that plan. Byrne felt a strange sensation sweep over him as he stepped inside the doorway. Something of the new stimuli within the establishment was familiar to him. It caused him to feel quite disorientated and he stood still in the entrance to examine the details of his senses, which Adams interpreted as a search for an empty table. There he found it: an American drawl emanating from the bar, where a man hunched up on one of the high stools was talking with, or rather at, one of the waitresses.

"Life is all about obligation," the voice was saying, "yet all I see are numerous exemplifications of sloth. Few take their responsibilities seriously. Few ever bother to think, to doubt, to question the mindless drivel they relentlessly stuff themselves with."

It was him. It was undoubtedly and undeniably him. Byrne was too slow to react appropriately; Adams was still blissfully unaware of the scientist's presence and her words were tumbling towards a careless utterance of his name. Before he could find his own words with which to interrupt her it was done. The pair of syllables flew out of the background mumble and across the room to their unintentional target. The American turned, casually, to look upon their origin. His eyes fell upon Byrne and, for a fraction of a second, there seemed to be a touch of genuine excitement in the ensuing smile. Byrne could not be sure. Then the professor turned back to the bar and to the waitress.

"Oh," said Adams.

"Damn," said Byrne. He dragged her to a table. "So much for your spies," he hissed.

"I don't understand," said Mary, "really I don't." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Maybe he has some sort of secret exit."

Secret exit, indeed, thought Byrne. What a bloody mess. "Stay here," he told her, "I'll have espresso." He got up and walked steadily towards the American, who was talking still to the waitress, who was politely nodding in all the appropriate places. Byrne stood behind

him and cleared his throat.

Weinstein, his eyes calm and confident, turned around and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"I'm told you're Donald Weinstein," Byrne said, sticking out his hand jerkily, as if he had purposefully left it until the last minute to perform this manoeuvre. "How do you do."

Weinstein took the hand and shook it, looking a little bemused. "You were correctly informed," he said, "May I... be of some help to you?"

"Actually, I was wondering what your interest was in *Roses and Tulips in a Dragon Vase*."

"Oh, the painting. Of course." The eyes briefly referenced their creator. "Naturally any reputation of mine would have to be based upon my spending. Well, mister... uh..?"

"Byrne," said Byrne, "Richard Byrne."

"Well, Mr Byrne, I prefer to keep such reasons personal. Might I enquire as to why it interests you to know?"

"Please forgive my impertinence," said Byrne, "I wouldn't normally be so forward, but this painting does mean a lot to me." He retrieved the computer photograph, hoping that Bergantin's assessment of the American's artistic knowledgeability was a true one. "This, you see, is the vase the painting depicts. It's been in my family for years."

Weinstein took the picture and examined it. "And you were curious," he said as he looked, "as to whether my reasons for wanting the painting were as wholesome as your own. You have my sympathies, Mr Byrne, but not, I'm afraid, my cooperation. I fully intend to buy the painting today."

Byrne acted accordingly, allowing himself to look taken aback at this abruptness. "Really," he said, "your cooperation has nothing to do with it. It's just that I heard you were a serious bidder and I was eager to make your acquaintance. But since you mention the auction I don't mind saying I think I'll give you a good run for your money, if nothing else."

"I hope so, Mr Byrne. Really I do." Weinstein was still gazing at the photograph, a look of fascination on his face. "This is a good picture. Would it be possible for me to have a copy?"

"Keep it," said Byrne, "I've plenty more. I'd far rather have the painting."

"Of course you would. So how, might I ask, did this lovely vase come into your possession?"

"Manet gave it to my great great grandmother a few weeks before he died," Byrne said, lighting a cigarette, "she was a friend. It's been my ambition to own the painting for... well, as long as I can remember."

"There is a problem with such ambitions," Weinstein said, "once they are fulfilled and the object of one's desires has finally been purchased, one finds oneself strangely lacking in motivation. Imagine, Mr Byrne, how much more purposeful your life will be tomorrow if you do not obtain the painting today. Imagine how significant a figure I will become to you if it is I who takes it. You will watch me. You will save. You will plan. But if you do get the painting I propose that, after a brief period of elation, you will find yourself feeling oddly unfulfilled. And then, perhaps, your mind will wander upon the inevitable question on so many people's lips these days: what shall I buy next?"

"Steady on, old chap," said Byrne, rather stiffly, "that's a little unwarranted. I'm hardly a layman, you know. Don't you think my circumstances are even a bit exceptional?"

"An exceptional exemplification, perhaps." Weinstein smiled broadly at the spy. "But perhaps not. Perhaps I underestimate you. After all, I know nothing about you, do I? Let me buy you a drink, Mr Byrne, so that we may sit a while and enjoy the quiet before the storm." He nodded, briefly, in the direction of Adams. "Such moments are best appreciated in male company, are they not?"

Byrne made a brief study of Weinstein's attire. The scientist was wearing jeans, trainers and a light grey sweatshirt, motified in black with the logo of some scientific institution somewhere. The cold eyes noted his appraisal and the remark they made in return was something along the lines of, *No-one tells me how to dress, Mr Byrne*. "Why not?" Byrne said, "Make it a glass of that Ballentines over there. With ice. Ordinarily I'd never drink so early on in the day, but, you're right, it is something of a special occasion; and it's not as if I've got to drive

anywhere later on."

"Bravo, Mr Byrne! I'll make it a double in that case." Weinstein relayed the order. Then he took a white box of Dunhill miniature cigars out of his coat pocket and lit one with a red, flameless lighter. He drew on it a few times, puffing, to create a thick cloud of rich smoke, then removed it from his mouth for the obligatory cigar smoker's evaluation. The drink came. Weinstein said, "To zest, Mr Byrne. To the moment. To the battle and the spirit of the battle. To the soul that we've forgotten," and he chinked his coffee with the whisky.

Byrne downed a good measure of his drink and felt its warming wake burn its way down into the pit of his stomach. It really was too early for this, he thought. "That's catchy," he said, "Is that from a book or something?"

Weinstein laughed solemnly. "Catchy," he said, "Yes, I suppose that would make an appropriate modern label. Funny, don't you think - this obsession of ours to package things and label them. I find it quite a brutal thing, personally. Imagine the writer who has struggled long and hard to describe society's wickedness and ended up being labelled 'radical.' That places him in the same box as mohicans and Marxists, so is it then surprising that the vast majority of precisely the sort of people that should be reading him chose not to do so?"

Byrne, wondering if Adams might be listening to them, said, "Perhaps people have enough on their plate to worry about without some writer telling them society's wicked. It's hardly a constructive thing to say, is it?"

"Constructive?" Weinstein sighed slightly and his cup slipped silently out of his fingers. Byrne noticed the escape and watched it all the way down to the black and white tiles below. The smash seemed to suck a second's worth of noise from the cafe as everyone turned to locate the event: hoping it might have been a waitress, Byrne thought and suddenly realised how irritating this must be. Weinstein pointed to the broken china and the splatter of milkless coffee. "It's hardly a constructive thing to say, Mr Byrne, that that cup is broken. But broken it is. And it's certainly more useful to note so than to proceed under the naive assumption that the cup is whole and ready and

waiting for its next fill of coffee. Or, to put it another way, one must first diagnose before one can remedy. Perhaps it is not immediately constructive to diagnose society as wicked, but it is, logically, the correct thing to do."

"*If* society is wicked," said Byrne, unimpressed by the demonstration, "that's a matter of opinion."

"Either it is or it isn't, Mr Byrne. It all depends upon how you define 'wicked.' But we are deviating from my point, somewhat. My 'catchy' toast was in reference to the thrill of the auction to come: a moment, Mr Byrne; a moment, regardless of whomsoever wins. We must not forget that moments are important. No-one will remember us for our possessions after we are gone, but they will surely recall our most famous moments - ultimately, you see, they are all that we have, and all that we leave to define us."

At Sothebys they walked up the stairs to the auction room, with Weinstein just a few steps behind. Byrne loitered around the back of the room, waiting for the American to sit down, then took a seat that was across the aisle from him and slightly behind.

They had two more lots to sit through. Finally the porter, an elderly, rather stout looking man, stuffed mercilessly into a dinner suit, wheeled the painting into the room for the appreciative audience to appreciate, and lot number forty three was proudly announced.

"Roses and Tulips in a Dragon Vase," said the auctioneer in a smooth and expensive tone. "A late work by the French impressionist Edouard Manet. On sale from the Buhrlé foundation. Ladies and gentlemen, I open the bidding at one hundred thousand francs."

Rolled up programmes started to bob up and down all around Byrne and the price, accordingly, started to rise in steady increments of ten thousand francs. Byrne could not help but marvel at the speed of the auctioneer; his gaze seemed cool, unhurried and uninterested, yet not the tiniest of flicks went unnoticed. "Two hundred thousand francs," he stated calmly, "and ten, and twenty. Two hundred and twenty thousand francs I am bid. And thirty, forty, fifty. Two hundred and

fifty thousand francs. And sixty. Two hundred and seventy. Two hundred and seventy thousand francs." Heads started to shake now and the dance of the programmes started to slow. After three hundred thousand francs there were just three or four of the original bidders left, Byrne reckoned. But he had yet to make his move. And so had Weinstein.

Sitting next to him, Adams fidgeted. Suddenly she whispered, "What did you make of him? Weinstein, I mean. Did it go ok?"

They were more or less the first words she had offered since he had returned to her table in the cafe and gulped down the cold espresso. He thought he had seen the reflection of his own fire in her eyes then and attributed her silence to that. Well, she could have chosen a better moment to break it, thought Byrne. He murmured to her, hoping it would be sufficient, "Strange fellow. Quite eccentric. Can't help but feel I've met him somewhere before. Maybe I've met too many evil geniuses." And, meanwhile, programmes started to flick from new places as the serious bidders moved in on their target. With these new competitors the price increment was raised to twenty thousand francs. Then to thirty thousand francs, thanks to a young man seated a couple of rows in front.

Byrne began to worry. He had to make some sort of impression on the American and yet, at the same time, he had to remain within the financial possibility credible of a man in his pretended position. Two million francs, the Chief of Staff had said, no more. And already five hundred thousand had been breached. Would he even get the chance to make a noticeable bid at this rate? Six hundred thousand. Seven hundred thousand. But then the bidding slowed suddenly and a reluctant little prod from someone in the front row was the last notch in this burst of price. An expectant silence entered the room and looked over everyone's shoulders. And still nothing from Weinstein, except a broad smile of happy contentment.

These few seconds, thought Byrne, very quickly, are crucial. Do I bid now or do I wait for him? But why would I wait? If I am who I say I am I would bid. Now. Because I just want the painting. Weinstein wants his drama - the only reason he's here is because he enjoys the event. He's indifferent to the painting. But I would bid.

Now.

But no. He stopped his hand from moving. *I would bid*, he thought, *but I mustn't*. Because his cover was only any good if it got him through the front door. Predictable behaviour would not impress the scientist. It was a battle he wanted, so Byrne had to give him a battle, and a memorable one. He would wait. He would sit. He would see Weinstein raise his programme first.

"Eight hundred and ten thousand francs," said the auctioneer again, this time with an air of formal finality. He raised his hammer and glanced around the room one last time.

Weinstein raised his programme.

A flicker of a smile crossed the auctioneer's face. "Nine hundred and ten thousand francs," he announced, and the room gasped. Now Byrne raised his programme. And so the price breached a million francs. The audience showed its appreciation of the drama with a quick sprinkling of applause. Weinstein waited for the noise to die before responding with a rather casual flick. Byrne replied with a sharp jab. The scientist swept it aside, yet it was almost a careless gesture, as if he was swatting a fly. Byrne lunged again, but uselessly. It was like throwing stones at a tank. Up went the price, relentlessly. And then, at one million, nine hundred and ten thousand francs, Byrne had just one bid left to play. "This is as far as I can go," he whispered to Adams, and he raised the damp programme a final time.

"Two million," said the auctioneer, "and ten thousand francs."

Weinstein hesitated. For a moment Byrne thought he had won, but then he realised the game the American was playing. It was as if he knew, somehow, that this was Byrne's last stab; this was just a little extra bit of entertainment, a final moment of drama before the end. The audience held its breath as Weinstein looked around at all those faces; doubt on every one of them as they looked back. Before his gaze had reached Byrne the whispered predictions that the painting would be his had already started to propagate. But Byrne knew they were wrong. And a big smile crept across the scientist's face when their eyes finally met.

The auctioneer repeated the price. Slowly, Weinstein raised his programme.

"Two million, one hundred and ten thousand francs I am bid." The audience broke into applause again. Across the noise Byrne found the auctioneer's eyes and shook his head. The other responded with a curt nod. He brought the hammer down. "Yours sir."

"Well that's that then," Byrne said to Mary. The room was suddenly seized by movement and noise. He spotted Bergantin pushing his way through towards Weinstein, to take some details. The Italian glanced briefly at Byrne and shrugged his condolences.

Just an object, and not a particularly sophisticated object at that. Paint on a piece of canvas. Byrne wondered if any of the bidders had actually wanted *Roses and Tulips in a Dragon Vase* because they liked it. For him it had been a possible key to Weinstein's company, for someone else, perhaps, an investment or the chance to add *Manet* to a list of painters on display, perhaps with an ambiguous 'a.' One painting, but a multitude of varied intentions, and how was he to know that his was the only extraordinary purpose? Perhaps a hundred great adventures had criss-crossed in that room today and gone their separate ways. *That man over there*, thought Byrne, as he waited in the foyer below, *knows that the reverse side of the painting's paper backing is a plan to a secret Nazi gold hoard buried somewhere in Africa. That man over there knows that the specially hollowed frame contains phials of a deadly new biological weapon to be smuggled into a target country. They've both miscalculated. Neither of them anticipated Weinstein. Now they've got to find a way of getting close to the painting. That means they need to know who he is and where he lives.* How ironic it would be, he mused, if Weinstein was broken into tomorrow night and killed whilst attempting to tackle the intruder(s). A master criminal slain as a layman for his innocent choice of purchase. End of case. End of story. A fatal collision of plots. A reader would throw the book down in disgust.

Weinstein's narrow face emerged from the swell at the top of the stairs and the eyes found Byrne immediately. The lips seemed twisted in a slightly hysterical way by the broad smile of acknowledgement.

His pace quickened noticeably. "Mr Byrne! Mr Byrne!" he cried as he approached, "What a battle! What a moment!"

This was the crucial bit. How on earth was he going to manage it? Byrne had decided to mention, very casually, that his consolation plan was to grab a week's ski-ing in the Valais. Something to do. Something to keep his mind off the defeat. And then, upon the shock revelation that this was in fact the place of Weinstein's own domicile, spend a good few minutes on well-I-nevers and the funny old ways in which coincidence worked. An invitation would have to be offered in that time, surely? Well, if one wasn't, Byrne would simply have to invite himself: *I just might drop in on you and take a look at my painting of yours*, or something along such lines. That wasn't unreasonable, was it?

"Congratulations," said Byrne stiffly, "I must say, I envy you your resources."

"I almost let you have the painting, Mr Byrne, I almost let you have it. It would have been worth the entertainment. The way you waited for me... extraordinary! They'll talk about today, oh yes. Well I couldn't let you have the painting, Mr Byrne, because then you'd have no reason to accept my hospitality for a couple of days."

Good God! thought Byrne, *Surely it can't be as easy as this.* He said, "And why would I have reason to accept now, Mr Weinstein?"

"A private viewing of the painting, of course! As long as you like. On the sole condition of your company at the dining room table. What do you say, eh?"

Byrne tried to sound only mildly interested. "It's hardly what I'd hoped for from this visit," he said, "and I had planned to fly back to London tonight. Why do you invite me? Do you live in Zurich?"

Weinstein smiled. "No, Mr Byrne, I live in Saas Fee. It's a little distance from here. It's down in the south; in the Valais. I'm taking the train back - it's a very pleasant ride, you'd be more than welcome to accompany me. Why do I invite you? That is a strange question! Why, because I expect to enjoy your company, of course. Come, Mr Byrne - see some mountains and breathe some air! You won't be disappointed, I promise you."

Byrne ummed and ahed a little, trying not to overdo it. The

business. His wife. He'd have to make some 'phone calls. They could manage without him for an extra couple of days, couldn't they? he asked Mary Adams, who nodded absolutely. "Alright then, Mr Weinstein," he said eventually, "Why not? Why not indeed? I hope I won't bore you. I'll meet you here in an hour. Actually, make it that cafe around the corner - then I can get some coffee and sandwiches before we go. Is that ok? Marvellous."

"You will take care, won't you?" Adams had said to Byrne. There had been a fear and a sadness in her eyes that he had wanted, suddenly, to kiss and caress away. But there had been no time for that. He made a routine quip on feminine fussiness and told her not to be silly by worrying about him. That was that. Then they had parted.

Byrne took the tram back to the Pullman-Continental, where he was happy to find his room evacuated. Only a short, hopeful note, written on the back of his own farewell, served to remind him of his earlier companionship. He tore it up and threw it away, then packed. In five minutes he was ready to leave and with sufficient time remaining for the last, peaceful cigarette that he always insisted on. He sat in the window, sharing the Marlboro with a single measure of Jack Daniels, and studied the normality below, recording every detail, creating a large, colourful picture in his head of innocent, everyday life: something he could recall as a distraction, if necessary, and he sincerely hoped it would not be. Then he was down to the amber end and the last few golden drops. His time was up. He left.

He met Weinstein at the cafe. After coffee and a light lunch they walked up Bahnhofstrasse to the railway station. The event caused the scientist to talk at great length on the efficiency of the Swiss and the cleanliness of their trains. Byrne waited, patiently, for the subject to change, but, once on the train, Weinstein dozed off in the heat of the sun through the window. He looked then, as do all sleeping men, ridiculously vulnerable, as if his face, in relaxing, had somehow unclothed and revealed itself. He was just flesh; slumped; discarded. All the strength and personality was gone. For a while Byrne had

entertained himself by debating the consequences of shooting the American there and then, and the head had lolled to one side and shaken gently to the rhythm of the train, as if to subtly discourage the idea.

They changed at Brig for a smaller train, and Saas Fee was finally reached at just after five o'clock. Throughout this latter part of the journey they covered the obligatory introductions which, as Weinstein had put it, had been put off for far too long. Donald Jeffrey Weinstein, then, proposed that he was a physicist, but offered little more than that on his current status, other than that it was all very complicated, really. He seemed far more interested in the business of Byrne and White Workholding, Ltd. and his questions came worryingly close to the limit of Byrne's knowledge.

"Engineering's a cut throat business," Byrne said, trying to steer the conversation into a less factual domain, "You've got to be so careful."

"I imagine your company is quite a large one," said Weinstein, "Do you supply to a large base of small customers or a small base of large ones?"

Aha! This could be padded out a little. "Well that's just it," said Byrne, "these days it's very dangerous to put all your business into the large companies. You've got to watch your back. Small customers might well know how to be awkward bastards at times, but at least you know where you are with them. Say a large company puts in a massive order, which you accept. You then have to expand so that you can meet the order - hire new staff, buy new machinery, perhaps even move to bigger premises; that sort of thing. They keep the business flowing just long enough to lull you into a false sense of security and then, when they've got you in their grasp, they 'phone up and tell you to cut your prices by half and that if you don't they'll go elsewhere. What can you do? Your smaller customers have left you because, at the time, their business didn't interest you any more and you're up to your ears in bank loans from the cost of expansion; you have to accept. So then they slowly run you down into the ground and finally, when you're bankrupt, they buy up the company for a song."

"Yes," said Weinstein, "Of course. There's nothing new in that. It

strikes me that anyone who is so greedy and naive as to accept these mass orders in the first place deserves whatever they get."

"Well it's a hell of a carrot to turn down. The smaller customers can be just as dangerous sometimes. If a company goes down with expensive equipment of yours they've not yet paid for then that's it - you've practically lost it. Plenty of companies went down that way during the recession - they extended their credit period to get more orders and so, when a few of their owing customers went bankrupt, that made them in debt to their suppliers... Sometimes a single company going down can set off a whole chain reaction. People don't realise this."

"Well you obviously did alright for yourself," said Weinstein, who looked a little bored now.

"Hard work," said Byrne, "and I'm lucky - my father's been in the business for a long long time. He knows all the tricks of the trade. We expanded very slowly and cautiously, and we've always kept our customers happy. It's taken me-"

"Actually," said Weinstein, "I'm after a new set of chuck jaws myself. I've re-bored them so many times there's practically no metal left. It's a Kitagawa power chuck. Two hundred mil diameter." He paused, ever so slightly. "Would you be able to help me with that, Mr Byrne?"

Byrne hesitated.

"Well," he said finally, "that depends. Is it a two jaw or three jaw chuck?"

"Three jaw," said Weinstein.

"Serrated jaws or cross tenon - I don't suppose you know the model number? Don't worry, actually - I can find that from the slot width and hole centre if I have to. Yes, we could supply you, if you wanted." Byrne gave the scientist one of the business cards, in a professional manner. "Standard jaws might be all that you need, but, depending on the type of job, we could specialise them. If you use them a lot you might like to consider hard jaws instead of soft."

"I see," said Weinstein. He smiled again.

At Saas Fee they caught the 'Alpine Express' to Maste, a cableway of small, red gondolas with enough room inside for four people.

Byrne watched the wooden chalets and the carless streets of the resort recede slowly and gracefully into the quiet distance, whilst Weinstein looked ahead, vaguely scrutinising the approaching pylons, as if it was the only thing he had yet to do on this trip. Then they were at Maste, with the option of taking the connection to Felskin, where the underground funicular railway, the 'Alpine Metro', starts its 3450 metre climb towards Mittelallalin. Instead they took a narrow path that led away from the small collection of buildings and across the mountainside. At least Byrne presumed it was a path they were following; the thick snow made it impossible to tell. Weinstein strode vigorously onward, shouting appreciative comments on the scenery back to Byrne, who tried to keep his mind from contemplating the perilous drop to his left. The silence was thick and overwhelming, and every remark the scientist made seemed to suffocate under its power. Byrne gazed down into the valley and felt hopelessly, hopelessly little.

After ten minutes or so they came to a small cable car station, hidden from general view by a little thicket of trees. The building itself was surrounded on three sides by a high fence topped off with barbed wire. Weinstein took a large metal key from his pocket and unlocked the gate, then pulled it open with a shower of snow. They walked up a few concrete steps and in through the open doorway, where a single gondola hung peacefully.

At first, when they moved off, they were only a few feet above the ground. They passed over a few trees, then a little field with wooden huts, then a river that was frozen at the edges. Then, with the distant rumble of pylon wheels, they soared up with the cables and over a thick wood of evergreens. The trees dropped slowly away as the inclination settled into the gentle start of a parabolic climb towards a distant ridge, where Byrne could just make out the next pylon. The wood stopped abruptly and only white remained below, erasing all the natural detail of the landscape. And it became impossible to guess an altitude with all this white: an occasional glimmer of blue could have been a puddle or a lake without something else to define it by.

Byrne swallowed as his ears started to feel the reduced pressure. A gust of wind set the gondola swinging slightly and broke the

mountain quiet with a gentle creak. They were approaching the ridge, beyond which there seemed to be a slight respite in gradient before the mountain took off again. It took a few minutes to get there, during which time the silence that had accompanied them for most of the way up gave way again to the distant whir of station machinery, which meant that they were approaching their point of destination. The slope steepened and the ground neared. The ridge disappeared above as they drew close. And then they seemed to rocket up, but it was only the sudden presence of detail - of the ridge sweeping down beneath them at the speed they had maintained all along - that gave this impression. Then there was just a short stretch over flat snow to go. And Byrne could see the house.

What a house.

The short path from the station to the terrace and the terrace, including the grand steps up to the main entrance, had all been swept completely free of the snow. And at the doorway Byrne paused to look back across the slopes. It was all so familiar, somehow.

The silence crept up on the noise of the station machinery, and smothered it, mercilessly. And suddenly it all came back, just for a moment; not a memory, as such, but a feeling: a horrible feeling of despair and fear and pain.

Then it was gone. Byrne felt slightly shaken up by the odd experience. In that silent second he had known, with a certainty, that dreadful things were waiting for him in this marvellous house.

CHAPTER FIVE

CIGARETTES GO WITH GARLIC

INTO THE dining room they went: a rectangular room running along the southern face of the building, carpeted and curtained in a deep red. They sat down at the table there. The butler, an elderly man, quite perfect in his deportment, had taken Byrne's bags on their arrival; now he went into the kitchen, to organise the food. So they sat for a while and talked about Saas Fee. They smoked a little. Byrne chose Pernod, mixed milky with water as an aperitif, Weinstein drank vermouth.

Presently the food came. It was, Byrne considered, one of the best meals he had ever had: chilled banana soup, followed by a fussili entrée and then a garlic-marinated duck, grilled, beside asparagus, broccoli and new potatoes.

They ate mostly in silence, but occasionally Byrne would glance across at Weinstein and find the scientist watching him. Weinstein smiled when Byrne's eyes met with his and made some passing comment, but nothing more. He ate quickly, but in an odd sort of way, rushing small amounts of food so that his overall speed was normal. Like a man hopping to keep up with a walker, thought Byrne; like a many cornered route at speed.

"The food was good, Mr Byrne?" he asked later, when the meal was finished.

"Excellent," Byrne replied in earnest.

"Thank you. The reason is simple: my chef is a genius. He loves his work, Mr Byrne, every creation is a masterpiece. Every fine tuck and fold of pastry, every extra soupçon of garlic or cinnamon, every vital drop of wine - all are as brushstrokes to a canvas for him. Alas, Mr Byrne, science can only as yet copy that which art creates. At

least for the moment. You see there will always be work for a chef such as mine. But then he is inspired. For those dreary 'cooks' whose only task is to mundanely replicate that which has been made the day before, the day before that, and the day before that for ages past there will be no room in the future. Technology will replace them. But the creation of new cuisine - the combination of old flavours into something new and inspirational - this is a long way away from automation.

"You see I may well be a scientist, but I do appreciate art. Does that surprise you? Oh come now, Mr Byrne, be honest! Are we not all conditioned into certain assumptions regarding scientists? Take, for example, the middle aged, bearded man with no dress sense, no hobbies and no understanding of society - he wears sandals, perhaps, and a faded tweed jacket with leather elbow patches. Yes? Or maybe the white coated man with spectacles and a clipboard, who endorses brands of washing powder, would be the more modern stereotype. Where does art come into this when all these men are concerned with is exactness? It is all that science is not, surely? Science is here to purge the world of magic and mystery, to cleanse us all with its cold, sterile wash. Do we not imagine that scientists are somehow opposed to art, as if they find it all rather distasteful and naively misguided.

"Assumptions, assumptions. It seems to me that nobody ever bothers to get to the truth of the matter. Perhaps people don't want to. I mean, it may well be that a particular scientist or group of scientists *do* fall into this category, but that will only be because they hold equally wrong assumptions about artists. Proper theoretical definition always gets overlooked. Not in my conversations, Mr Byrne: a scientist is a person who concerns himself with the rigours and exactness of scientific methodology in the pursuit of an understanding of the mechanics of physics, chemistry, medicine... whatever. What does this say about art? Nothing! Art is something entirely different. It is not even slightly concerned with the goals of science. Art is about pleasure, about like and dislike, about *aesthetics*. So, *an artist* is a person who concerns himself with combining certain elements into something aesthetically pleasing. Where is the contradiction of science in that? Where is the opposition?

"It's all so simple, once you get your facts straight. This is why I despair with people: so many problems where a problem does not exist, so many judgements when a judgement is not called for. It is all an unnecessary complication of life. And yet it goes on. I hear of all these pointless pointless debates as to whether a painting is good or not, whether a certain song constitutes music or not: people trying to assess and categorize and measure art. They can't just say they don't like something - they have to condemn it, they have to label it as 'awful' or 'crap' or 'shit'. And why? Because the unspoken implication behind saying that this song or this painting or this pot is awful, is that that anyone who does actually like it must therefore be stupid. And this is what it is all about, Mr. Byrne: scoring points. Petty minded competitiveness. No-one cares for the truth about art any more, what it really is or what it could teach us about ourselves. It's just too convenient not knowing."

The scientist laughed as he dabbed the corners of his mouth with a napkin. "And then, at the pinnacle of my list of things to loathe, there is this entity which refers to itself as the 'art critic'. Here I begin to cry with frustration, that somebody is actually getting paid to feed all these misconceptions; that somebody who is held up above all others as a person who supposedly knows and understands art, the concept and theory of art inside and out and back to front, has actually missed the whole fundamental point, which is that our likes and dislikes are all founded upon our own personal experiences and so, since no two people can both have had the same experiences, no two people can have the same appreciation of a 'piece of art'. Why does a classical music teacher not like dance music? Because he has hardly ever listened to dance music before - not because dance music is rubbish. If you are unacquainted with something you will always first have to acquaint yourself with it before you can relate to it and appreciate it. It's like a good joke - you'll never find it funny that to sink an Irish submarine you have to knock on the door, unless you are first acquainted with the popular British notion that all Irish people are stupid. We learn, after all, by association. Mum and Dad always listen to Beethoven in the house, therefore little Billy only likes Beethoven. Another example: all but a tiny segment of all the music

written to date is based upon the major and minor scales, so this is what we are used to - if we then listen to music based upon the *chromatic* scale we find it odd and unappealing - 'unmusical,' one might say, or even 'unartistic', but if the situation was the other way round we would undoubtedly find music based upon the major and minor scales just as strange.

"All so simple, Mr Byrne, and yet all so misunderstood. How should I interpret an 'art critic' telling me that something I happen to like is rubbish? Should I mourn for not having shared the same life as him and therefore not being able to understand art as he does? Should I try to make myself hate this thing on the basis of bettering my taste? No. I should pay him not the slightest bit of attention, because he shouldn't even exist!"

Byrne said, "But a critique of a piece of art surely involves an assessment of the skill which went into it - the fineness of the brushstrokes, the intricacy of the carving."

"You are an intelligent man, Mr Byrne, and I am impressed with your reply, for it is indeed the obvious one. But you are diverging from my point. The skills you speak of are not remarkable - not if they can be duplicated by a machine, which they can. No, it is the way in which these skills are *used* which an admirer appreciates. But note my use of the word 'admirer,' for if a person does not admire an end product then he doesn't appreciate the craftsmanship.

"Ultimately, you see, a piece of art is merely a permutation: a permutation of all the elements - and skills - available. It is therefore more of a discovery than a creation, and the creating more of a voyage. Which way now? Which colour next? Left or right? Major or plagal cadence? A determined man might make his destination quickly, but a fool might also stumble upon the spot, quite by accident. Determination only aids discovery - it is not a prerequisite. If a piece of music is good to the ears then it is good to the ears - that a fool discovered it does not interest them, it is only so much politics."

"Then surely you have contradicted yourself," Byrne said, "If art is merely permutation then technology can handle that easily."

"Quite so, Mr Byrne, but consider the endless combinations. It would be beyond our capability to sift through them all. We must at

least agree that one goal of science should be to make our lives easier - not more arduous!

"But come, Mr. Byrne, why are we sitting in these hard chairs for our conversation, when the meal is finished and we could be lounging in front of my fire? Will you smoke? I find tobacco most agreeable with the taste of garlic still in my mouth. Let us retire to the sitting room and continue our talking there."

The two men got up from the dining table and walked through large double doors into a lounge that was simply furnished, but lavish for the paintings it was hung with. Weinstein's purchases hung on all four walls, all dropped from an invisible line that ran parallel with the ceiling and about two feet below it. There was no apparent theme other than impressionist (and, of course, expensive): no consistency of era or depiction, or painter, or even size or shape. In fact they hung there, only half illuminated by the low hanging light, as if that in itself was their only purpose: to hang, to cover the wall, to go unnoticed. Weinstein walked past them without looking in their direction once. He sat down in a high backed chair in front of the fire and motioned for Byrne to do likewise.

Between the two chairs was a small table of polished mahogany, on which a silver tray offered a bottle of Jack Daniels bourbon, a bottle of Martel VSOP cognac, a brandy glass and a whisky tumbler, a cut glass ashtray and a small wooden box divided into three compartments, each of which contained about forty cigarettes: Marlboro, Benson and Hedges, and John Player Special. Weinstein took a box of La Paz cigars from his pocket and lit the splayed end slowly.

Byrne lit a Benson and Hedges. "Well," he said presently, "you're a thoughtful man, Mr. Weinstein."

"Indeed I am, Mr. Byrne," replied the scientist, "But why shouldn't I be? Would you not prefer yourself that people were a little more thoughtful? Would not the world be a... 'better place' if this were so?" He poured himself a measure of Brandy and swilled it about in his glass for a while, giving one of his nameless paintings a vague inspection. "I find that there is a tendency amongst people," he said, "to label a thoughtful person 'the philosophical type,' as if implying

him to be an extremist, as if elevating the process of thinking and reasoning to specialist skills, and thus excusing the layperson from having to partake in such activities. It's almost as if they think they have a *choice*, almost even as if they think they have a right to be ignorant. But is it not every man's duty to be thoughtful? How can one justify the existence of the *unthoughtful* people? What purpose do they serve, when most of their time is spent in following mindless routines, watching mindless television and reading mindless newspapers, mindlessly buying cars and stereos and televisions and videos and computer games and cookers and dishwashers to keep up with the mindless neighbours, mindlessly jumping to ill-formed conclusions, and mindlessly reproducing so that they may pass on these 'opinions' to their mindless children? The only contribution they make to society is to keep the industries which cater for them in business. Hardly a justification.

"Enough of my droning. I fear I am being discourteous. Really it is far too long since I properly entertained, my work of late has made an unsociable creature of me."

"You must tell me about your work," Byrne said quickly.

"Later, later. When we can afford for you to be bored, Mr. Byrne. But first you must tell me something of *your* life."

So Byrne routinely rattled off the cover: the parents, the education, the business, and so on. Weinstein listened intently, occasionally smiling. Byrne began to feel uncomfortable with his story. The words continued, but they began to lack conviction as he became more and more convinced that they were not fooling the scientist even slightly.

He found himself flailing, so he moved deftly onto a more familiar subject: travel. The rather tenuous link was that his work took him abroad quite often: engineering exhibitions and so on. Then he spoke about his holidays, compiling the glimpses of Eastern European life he had caught on various cases into personal vacation tales. He spoke about the different cultures and the 'characters' he had met. He spoke about liking to see something different on his holidays and this being character building. He spoke proudly about how he liked to live his holidays as close to the host culture as possible, rather than living it

up in some posh hotel. Oh, Byrne could speak all night about his travels. If only he had some photographs...

"I appreciate a well travelled man," Weinstein said when the tale had ground mercifully to a halt, "How narrow minded is the person who has ventured no distance, don't you find? I did a bit, when I was younger. The first incredibility that made its mark on me was that people on this planet could live in conditions and cultures so far removed from our own, the second was that people at home could be so completely oblivious to this fact. At this very moment, Mr. Byrne, somebody in the world is being tortured to death. Somebody is starving to death. At this very moment there are millions of people wondering how they're going to make it through the next week. And people know this - they must know it, for the information is freely available these days - but they don't truly realise it, because they've never *seen* it; they've never *touched* it. Travel is like the death of a loved one that finally makes you realise people do die. You see these things for real. In front of you. All around you. There are no well composed television or newspaper pictures to admire, just poverty, despair and chaos; just life in its purest form, stripped of all the euphemism and façade we shroud ourselves in.

"Sometimes I wonder if it is our only aim to create some sort of pseudoland to live in, a little fabricated paradise where everything is just so, and where the only links to the real world outside are in well presented charity shops. On my last trip to England, Mr. Byrne, I made the big mistake of going into one of your chain restaurants - 'Reaper,' I think it was called, some sort of middle class, fast food outlet. I went to the bar for a drink and the girl that was serving there had a name badge that proclaimed her as 'Sarah'. So I called her over by this name, but, much to my surprise, she paid me not the slightest bit of attention. Nothing. I began to wonder if she was hard of hearing or if I was somehow being offensive - well, I never did fully get to grips with your precious decorum. Then she seemed suddenly to realise it was to her I was speaking, and over she came, apologising with every footstep and explaining to me that her name was actually Rebecca. You see that particular Reaper Restaurant didn't have any 'Rebecca' badges, so she'd had to wear a 'Sarah' badge instead. They'd

forced her. Do you believe that? Better that than no name badge, apparently. Better that than a name badge with the correct name, but not a *Reaper Restaurant* name badge. We have reached this point, it seems, where appearances and impressions are deemed to be more important than reality. Reality, apparently, is too much for us civilised westerners to handle. We have to dress things up. We have to polish them. We have to shower them with throwaway words and phrases and soak all the bad things in palatable euphemism. 'Quality,' Mr Byrne. 'Value.' These words were never intended to be adjectives. What the hell does 'state of the art' mean? What the hell is a 'mouthwatering menu?' Making people redundant is now called 'right-sizing.' Filming wars and famine is now called 'quality news coverage.' You see? You can't have a salad, you have to have a *tossed* salad. You can't have a cold beer, you have to have an *ice* cold beer. And you can't have a small cola, because they've renamed the small size 'children's' to encourage adults to buy a larger size. Image. Façade. Manipulation, Mr Byrne. Fruit drinks overflowing with ice, peel, novelty straws, toys and umbrellas to give it that 'special look.' Out of reach bookshelves filled with faded, gold type hardcovers to give it that 'intelligent look.' The business look of half-rimmed spectacles and skyward sales charts. The caring look of smiling, incidentally beautiful, nurses. The scientific look of white coats and clipboards. The sales; the special offers; the incessant, incessant slogans. The plastic smiles and courtesies. And, my god, *the advertisements*. Image, Mr Byrne. Façade. Our western cultures are nothing more than machines of deceit and illusion to keep the stupid people happy."

"Good Lord!" said Byrne, "Surely you don't believe that? We are amongst the most privileged people in the world! We have freedom of speech - doesn't that count for something? We have democracy!"

"Pah! What good is democracy when you are lied to most of the time, and when ninety per cent of the population are stupid enough to believe those lies? They tell you, for example, that unemployment has fallen in the last month. Well hurrah! But what they don't tell you is that more people are working on pittance wages than before; that thousands more people are being evicted from their homes because

they can no longer keep up with their mortgage repayments because the job they thought they had for life is gone and they're now on a dollar an hour serving cappuccinos in a cafe bar; that the low-paid workforce are bullied and blamed and overworked and are slowly beginning to crack under the pressure. They tell you they've put money back in your pocket by cutting taxes, but they neglect to tell you that the subsequent rise in the cost of train fares, water rates, prescriptions, etc, takes that money straight back out again, and some more. They tell you they're going to put 5,000 more policemen on the beat next year, but they forget to tell you they made 10,000 redundant last year. Are you beginning to get the picture, Mr Byrne? Deception, through half-truths and omission. *Lies*. Lots and lots and lots of lies. No, democracy is as much a part of the façade as everything else - a 'quality' saving grace of a nation - when all else fails we do at least have a democracy!

"I mean, take this hackneyed debate over the media and influence. I was listening to something about this on your world service the other day. 'Does the media influence?' they were asking. It's always seemed to me rather an odd question to ask of an audience, since the answer is most obviously yes. Would companies spend so many billions on advertising their products if the media did not influence? Would political parties treasure airtime so much if the media did not influence? But, apparently, I'm wrong, and the argument goes something along the lines of this: there is *no scientific evidence* to suggest that the media has an influencing effect. That's it. No further explanation required, apparently. No scientific evidence... blah blah blah... period. How many times before have we heard the smug firing of that phrase by some company executive or spokesperson? No Scientific Evidence to suggest that working in a nuclear power plant is bad for you. Yes? No Scientific Evidence to suggest that dumping X in the sea will do any damage to the environment. Ring any bells? And your average Joe, of course, infers this well-crafted wording to mean that there is no possibility of scientific evidence ever existing to suggest the media has an influencing effect or, in other words, that the media doesn't influence. But what this statement actually means is that no study *to date* has found any scientific evidence, which could

just be because none of the studies were any good. The easiest way to have No Scientific Evidence, Mr Byrne, is not to do any research in the first place!

"And look at the experiments, Mr. Byrne. First the subject reports on how aggressive he feels, then he watches a violent piece of film, then he reports again on how aggressive he feels and the experimenter goes off and compares the two sets of data statistically. Such an artificial set up surely could not hope to uncover any relationship which exists in the *real* world, which is almost certainly *cumulative* over a period of several years, which is almost certainly *interactive* with other variables such as the company you keep, how much your parents let you watch television as a child, what your other activities are, whether you *have* a television... An experiment which properly addressed all these relationships would have to be run over several years, would have to involve thousands of varied subjects and would have to be a work of art in its intricacy. Who would fund such a venture? Nobody who claims that 'there is No Scientific Evidence to suggest the media influences people,' I'll wager. All part of the façade machine. Give only the information that will make a gullible public leap to the wrong conclusion. 'There is no scientific evidence to suggest the media has an influence.' 'Ah,' thinks Joe, 'So science has proved it then. It's ok for me to watch whatever I like. I am a mature and uninfluenced person, master of my own destiny!' And the final irony, Mr. Byrne, is that what is actually happening here is that the media is influencing the public into thinking that the media doesn't influence the public!

"Bit by bit, Mr Byrne; piece by piece. Each piece might appear as nothing on inspection - a special offer here, a scientific denial there: innocent, harmless - but the pieces add up. Silently, cunningly, they work their way under your skin. Bit by bit by bit. And then, before you know it, the façade is part of you and you are part of the façade. Brainwashed. Taken over. Hypnotised by the sparkling allure of it all. Snatched. No-one questions. No-one wonders. No-one deviates. The so-called 'rebellious' youths are just as taken in by the extra 'previously unreleased tracks' on their CD single as the 'normal' adults are by their special edition video including a unique ten minute

'making of' look behind the scenes and five exclusive colour prints. And the buyers of T-shirts emblazoned with slogans and phrases really do think they've been extraordinarily witty by buying the nth copy of another man's joke.

"And science. Science has been violated. Science has been chained up and caged and starved into submission like a circus animal, so that it can do no damage to the machine. It only looks where the funders tell it to look, only uncovers what the funders tell it to uncover. It has lost its dignity and self-respect. For Image. For façade. For, Mr Byrne, Money.

"But we have been underestimated. We will escape, and we will have our revenge. And sooner than you think, Mr. Byrne. Sooner than you think."

Weinstein refilled his glass with brandy and raised it in a silent toast to that last remark. He downed it in one.

"How's that then?" Byrne said innocently.

"Well," said the scientist, "when one *really* wishes to confront a problem and be rid of it, one must get to the root of it all - the very foundations upon which that opposition rests - and then find some way of destroying it. Completely. And in this case, as I said, the root of the problem is money."

Byrne's attention snapped into focus at that remark. This had to be relevant. *Money. One must get to the root of it all and find some way of destroying it.* A bomb in Fort Knox? Byrne wondered. The vaults of the Bank Of England? Why not both? Why not all the gold reserves in the world together? He sat up in his chair and said, "Not so easy to destroy, eh?"

"Quite right. That is why we are so crippled. It is every man's life blood - we cannot survive without it. It was bad enough in the days so commonly referred to as old and good, when money simply clothed, sheltered and fed you. But these days money is more than just that. These days money buys identity as well as physical survival. The modern goals, Mr Byrne: house ownership; big, flashy, shiny, high-tech cars with designer graphics and added safety features; hotel holidays in the sun in summer and hotel holidays in the snow in winter; satellite TV; the perfect wedding; the perfect kitchen,

complete with all its matching plates, pots, pans, breadbin, boards and spice rack. These are the things we all look forward to. These are the things we plan and fill our time with. Notice, Mr Byrne, how they all require money. No study. No practice. No dedication. Just money. This is how we justify our existence these days. We buy things. Or rather, I might add, we buy the *right* things. Through their novel concept of 'fashion' the money-makers have turned us all against one another in a perpetual battle for correct possession. Clothes, furniture, holiday destinations. Even electronics! They want to fool us into thinking shopping to be an educated business. Skilled. Specialist. When you make a good buy you're supposed to feel as though you've achieved something academically as well as materially. But the bottom line is that once everyone has their silver stereos they make them black, once everyone has their black stereos they make them grey, and soon they'll be white, or silver again. No-one has time to think 'is all this buying really a justification of my life?' because they're too busy planning their next purchase. That's the fun of it: they see, they like, they save, they buy. Then they see something else, and so on and on it goes. People's houses aren't homes any more: they're showrooms. Look what we've got, look at our decor, look at our furnishings, look how neat and tidy it all is: the grey television neatly in the corner on its grey, television trolley; the once-watched videos all lined up exactly on the shelves, probably in alphabetical order; the cushions all plumped up and perfectly positioned in each corner of the sofa; the week's periodicals compactly preserved in the magazine rack; the set of matching watercolours hung together on the wall, their frames going tastefully with the curtains; the reference to the token hobby, perhaps some knitting or a DIY manual, resting casually on the coffee table; the family photographs adorning the mantelpiece in a privileged sort of way. Meanwhile you stand there and you don't want to sit down for fear of dirtying that sofa. You can't help but wonder if *they* don't sit down for fear of dirtying that sofa. After all, being sat on was hardly what the sofa was chosen for in the first place now, was it?

"This is what it's all about: setting impressions. Image. If some scientist wants to mess about in some laboratory making gigantic

leaps in human understanding then fair enough. But does he have a nice car? Does he have a nice house? Does he wear the right clothes? Does he have a wife? If not then he's 'eccentric,' a 'crank,' an outcast. 'Oh Jim,' they'll say fondly, like they were talking about some pet, 'he's always playing with his test tubes. Ha ha ha.' Image and money are inseparable. Do you see? Image makes money and money makes image. At least, money makes image if you spend it properly - and for properly read popularly. How do you find out what's popular? You watch the television; you read the newspapers. All you have to do is to absorb some mindless image for a while and then somehow your subsequent choice of product implies an inherent sophistication. Those who are actually doing something useful with their time and are therefore unacquainted with the latest twists and turns in the popular image are the ones labelled 'out of touch' and laughed at. They're usually the ones told to 'get a life,' or something along those lines.

"As you say, Mr Byrne, money is not so easy to destroy. It is not just a part of our culture. It *is* our culture.

"But what if science outgrew the need for money? What if it found a way of providing everything that money can buy at virtually no cost? What would people do then? What would they strive for, with their prime directive suddenly removed?

"What would they have left?" said Weinstein.

He crushed the fat, brown stub of his cigar into the crystal glass. Now, apparently, it was Byrne's turn to talk. He said, hesitatingly, "I don't understand. How could that be possible?"

Weinstein smiled. "Maybe tomorrow," he said, "maybe then I'll enlighten you as to the true future of this planet. After you've seen the painting, of course! I was assured of its delivery tomorrow morning. So you shall have a pleasant awakening, Mr Byrne!"

And with that the scientist's mood had changed completely. He made pleasant conversation for a few minutes, the sort of conversation that implies an end of talk to be nigh. Then he stretched his arms, yawned, commented on what an eventful day it had been, and thus excused himself to bed.

The Butler showed Byrne up to his room. When the door clicked

shut Byrne flung himself onto the double bed and lay there for just a few minutes, letting the tensions drain out of his body. Then he got up and had a steaming hot shower. He put on the robe which had been left for him and hung up his clothes to air. Then he made a quick, but thorough, search of the room for hidden cameras. He checked all the usual places: behind the mirrors, the light fittings and junctions, apparent screw heads and drawer/cupboard knobs; he unplugged the television and turned it to face the wall. Then he took a small, electronic organiser from the breast pocket of his jacket and selected the currency exchange feature from calculator mode. He walked slowly around the bedroom and the bathroom, holding it out in front of him and sweeping it over the fittings, scanning for listening devices. Once that was done and he was satisfied there were no miniaturised microphones concealed about the room, he put the organiser into memo mode and connected it up to a digital mobile telephone from his suitcase. Then he rang Mary Adams' apartment in Zurich.

Oddly, there was no reply. And after fifteen rings or so a recorded female asked him, in German and Italian, to replace the handset and try again. He did so, but with the same result, which really was quite exceptionally strange. So he rang headquarters in London instead and got put through to the Chief of Staff immediately.

"Dick!" Byrne noted a slight tension in Stephenson's voice. "How are you?"

"Stoic, John," Byrne replied, "I lost out at the auction today. Did you hear? An American chap called Weinstein beat me to the painting. Over two million it went for. Did Mary tell you I'm staying on for a bit? Weinstein himself is putting me up. Christ, you should see this place John: a mountainside mansion in the Valais - clean air, good food, butler service. I'm almost glad I lost!"

The organiser beeped twice and the words "CAS message" started to flash on the liquid crystal display. Byrne kept talking, mentioning the glorious weather, and typed "BABYLONIAN" on the tiny rubber keyboard. "Decoding..." reported the organiser. And then the following appeared: "Auction details reported by MA at 12:36. Since then we have heard nothing from her. She missed her check-in call at

20:00 and continues not to respond. Can you advise?"

Byrne felt his stomach tighten as he read the words. Missing a check-in was considered inexcusable under any but the worst of predicaments. So Mary was in trouble. He forced the thoughts from his head and typed, "No. Parted company at 11:45." The message would be coded, then scattered into the telephone's binary signal at a synchronisation rate known only by HQ and Byrne's mobile phone. He pressed enter.

Credit where credit was due, thought Byrne, keen for distraction, the Chief of Staff certainly knew how to waffle. For a man known ordinarily by his quietness his telephone verbosity was really quite extraordinary. A minor personnel problem on the workshop floor, he had said, by the way. Possibly. He didn't like to mention it, but... well, there were certain attitudes that really had to change within the company. Discipline, Richard, discipline. Not a major problem *now*, of course, else Richard would naturally have noticed it for himself. But soon, Richard, very soon. If things don't change around here. It was the very epitome of male gossip: the slow and gradual build up to the real nitty gritty; the cautious, careful approach that backed off the moment it looked in danger of being labelled bitchy (for bitching is the woman's domain and to be frowned upon by all good men). He was indifferent. Casual. What attitudes? asked Byrne. Oh, but he didn't like to talk about it. *Attitudes*, you know. They could discuss it when Richard got back. If he felt like it. Nothing he couldn't handle for the moment, certainly -

"Weinstein?" asked the organiser.

"Difficult to say," typed Byrne. "I think he's our man. He hasn't mentioned MT yet, but he was talking about 'destroying money' this evening. Better warn the gold repositories somehow - get them to step up their security - maybe he's thinking of transmitting a bomb into some of them. He's totally obsessed with his own self-righteousness, I really think he'd do it if he could. And he could, couldn't he? I'm going to take a look around the house in a minute."

"Ok," replied the organiser, "GL."

"Well anyway Dick, this must be costing you a small fortune. I'll let you be on with it then. No rush, you know. Enjoy yourself. I'll

handle things here, don't you worry. Ok then? See you then Dick. Bye."

Byrne sat for a while on the side of the bed and smoked a cigarette whilst he thought about Mary. Then he reminded himself that there was nothing he could do for now except to get on with his job. And the next part of that was the clandestine survey of the house he had just promised Stephenson. He shut his eyes and concentrated on recalling all the geography experienced thus far, on forming a map in his head and a starting point. He started with the satellite pictures, which had described the building as a long, squat 'T' shaped construction, the flat top of the T being the presented face of Weinstein's home that looked out across the valley and the slopes. The main entrance, up the fan of granite steps from the terrace, was positioned in the middle of this face and, correspondingly, opened into the middle of the hallway beyond; or rather a small anteroom that led into the hallway, since the entrance protruded from the front of the house by about six feet. The hallway, then, was the intersection point of the horizontal and vertical parts of the T: to the left and right of the hallway were the wings, and if you continued into the house, your back still to the front door, you would leave the horizontal altogether and enter the vertical stem.

The hallway was tiled in chequered black and duck white, and the walls were oak panelled from ceiling to floor. Two grand staircases curled down to the left and right from the balcony above, solidly bannistered in the same oak and carpeted in wine red Wilton. At the foot of each, covered in a leather that somehow matched this red exactly, was a large door, and a third such door opposed the main entrance, declaring itself to lead into the library. The door at the foot of the right-side staircase was unmarked. The door at the foot of the left-side staircase led into the dining room, through which the kitchen and the lounge were accessed. It seemed, at first, something of a clumsy arrangement that one had to walk through the dining room to get to the lounge, until one realised that the placing of Weinstein's sitting room at the far end of the western wing would bathe it in evening sunlight each day, whereas the dining room, with its south-facing bay windows, would receive the brighter, crisper light required

of breakfast and lunch.

Above the library, occupying the stem at second floor level, was the 'empty room,' as Weinstein had called it: a large, featureless 'ideas area,' devoid of distraction, and the scientist had darted up the stairs to this room just minutes after their arrival in order to 'solidify' an idea that had come to him. And within the left and right wings at this level the six front-facing bedrooms had been arranged in two groups of three, of which Byrne's was the most westerly at the far end of the left wing, placing it above the lounge.

All of this meant that the doorway to the right of the main entrance would be Byrne's starting point: nondescript and unobtrusive as it had seemed, this was clearly the door to the rest of the house, which included all of the right wing at first floor level and the entire ground floor below. He dressed quickly, leaving his shoes off, and slipped quietly out of his room. The landing lights were on outside, but no-one was about. Keeping hidden cameras in mind, Byrne made his silent way down the empty corridor as much of a stroll as possible. He worked on the excuse he would use if discovered. He passed the empty room and padded lightly down the right-side staircase to the door at the bottom, only to discover he'd omitted to notice its lack of a handle in his mental reconnaissance. No key hole either. Byrne pushed on the door. Then he pushed on it more heavily. And then someone cleared their throat behind him.

It was the butler. Confusing remark, thought Byrne. He said, "Aren't you supposed to be on the other side of this door?"

The butler did not blink. "I assume you mean for me to infer that you have mistaken this as being the doorway into the dining room," he said. "It isn't, sir. That would be the doorway over there, sir. Were you looking for me?"

"As it happens, yes." Byrne rubbed his temples. "I've a king size headache. Too many king sizes, I think. Do you have any paracetamol."

The old man's features quivered slightly and then he replied, "Of course sir. If you'll come with me." He led the way across the hall and through the dining room, where, from a small drawer in a dresser, he produced a blue and white box of tablets. "Paracetamol sir," he

said, proffering it, "I hope your head gets better. Would you like me to show you the way to your room again?"

"No no. I think I've got it: left stairs, left turn, end room." He recited the words parrot fashion. "That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes sir. That is indeed the way. Well goodnight then sir. Sleep well."

Byrne made his way up the stairs with exaggerated weariness, but inside his mind was a whirl. Where the hell had the old man come from like that? How was it conceivable that Byrne had not heard him approach? Across a tiled floor, for Christ's sake. And clearly the butler had not believed a word of his flustered bodge of a cover. Well who would?

On his first night. On his first attempt. Byrne had drawn attention to himself and before he had even discovered a thing in this house to support the concerns of his employers.

Not good, Byrne thought grimly, not good at all.

CHAPTER SIX

THE UNTHINKABLE SELF-QUESTIONING

THERE WAS a shiny metal mixed in with Byrne's morning vision, a steel so polished the light seemed endlessly to bounce. Everything was hollow and empty and hard.

The sheets seemed as fluff by comparison. Byrne found them vaguely surprising as he awoke, his mental timer bringing him back to consciousness within a minute of the hour he had three times repeated to himself before bed last night. He yawned. It was, he had noted, becoming increasingly difficult to get up in the morning lately. Today he felt as though the whole night had been spent pacing up and down somewhere. *So much for mountains*, he thought, and dragged himself into the shower for the life to be slapped back into him in an ice cold drenching.

Byrne dressed, then he threw open the curtains and the window to look upon the day. A sweep sweep sweep floated up from the terrace below, where the butler was brushing the night's snow into little drifts beyond the edge, and at a pace that somehow befitted the brightness and briskness of the fresh morning. The old man moved out of the slowly retreating shade and into the sunlight, where the snow was crispier and crunched beneath his feet. For a minute at least, his was the only sound of the mountainside, but then the shrill whine of station machinery burst out of the silence and the empty cable car flew swiftly from its little house. Byrne watched the gondola to the first pylon at the ridge, where it dropped out of sight as though the valley had reached up and plucked it. The butler watched it too. And just as Byrne was imagining how fine it would be to be aboard that cable car, with freedom at the end of the ride, the old man turned suddenly, as if on a whim, to stare directly at him.

"Lovely day," Byrne remarked, smiling. He gestured at the *viertausender* horizon and added, "Jolly nice view you have up here. Is the master up yet, by the way?"

"Professor Weinstein rose an hour ago sir," the butler replied. "He asked that you might meet him in the library when you are finished breakfasting."

"The library," said Byrne, "that's the door opposite the front door, yes?"

"Yes, sir. Just ask the maid if you need reminding."

So Byrne made his way downstairs to the dinning room and thereupon devoured a feast of eggs, bacon, toast, orange juice and three cups of hot, black coffee. And then he walked across the hallway to the library.

The library was a long, spacious room, but there were no windows and so it relied entirely on artificial light. In fact, other than the door through which he entered, Byrne could spot no break whatsoever in the bookshelves that clung to all four walls, crammed with books and journals of all sizes and colours, from floor to ceiling. Though brightly lit, it was dull and dingy by comparison with the morning that pervaded the rest of the building, and the grimy combination of cigarette smoke and coffee clung heavily to the air. It was a sort of timeless zone, unaffected by hour or season. Still. Quiet. Separate.

But Weinstein, who was seated at a large mahogany table, seemed the very epitome of morning freshness. His ruddy face was even ruddier from its morning toilet and perhaps even an early walk on the mountainside. His eyes were lively and alert and vigorous. He beamed at Byrne as he entered. "Good morning, Mr. Byrne! I trust you slept well. Please excuse my absence from the table, but I do prefer an early start. Was breakfast to your liking?"

"It was excellent," said Byrne, seating himself at the table.

"A feast rather bland in originality, but the palette requires reassurance in the morning. Please smoke, Mr. Byrne. Would you like some more coffee? Then I will call for two." He pressed a small button underneath his desk and presently the maid entered to take the request.

"The morning should be given to leisure," Weinstein stated. He

leaned over and took a Marlboro from a box in the centre of the table. And Byrne did likewise. "Don't you find, Mr. Byrne, that the mind needs a little warming up each day, before its exercise? I myself won't even consider approaching my laboratories until at least ten o'clock. And then a light lunch at one will keep me going until seven, perhaps. Start late, end late. That is my philosophy. The hours remain unchanged, but the attitude is so much more focused. Of course I would never advocate sloth. The great British lie-in is hardly a productive occupation. A hobby maybe, exercise, reading, listening to the radio, playing an instrument - something which is self-enhancing. It all adds up. We need our distractions, Mr. Byrne. They are refreshing, challenging, inspiring. Myself I like to read in the morning. Anything will do. The mind can possess a vast array of knowledge if it so chooses, and one is never to know when those extra trifles one has come across could become of use. I like to know about as many things as possible and I like to know how they all fit together. I have chosen to specialise in certain fields, yes, but that does not preclude me from taking a casual interest in others."

The maid returned with the coffee. She was a young Swiss girl in her early twenties, or thereabouts: blonde, slim, tanned, about five foot nine. She was dressed in a long brown skirt, a white blouse, and boots. As she poured Weinstein made a little conversation with her: How was she today? Had the painting arrived? She responded politely, smiling where appropriate. Then she left and Weinstein finally lit that cigarette he had been waving around in the air for about five minutes now. The smoke seemed to be escaping the confines of the little white stick as it curled and twisted towards the ceiling, or rather there was just a touch of freedom in those innocent wisps which had somehow escaped his attention. "The Swiss," he commented, "always so damned polite. Ideal servants, of course, but..."

"Why did you come here?" Byrne asked.

"To Switzerland? Why not? I have a great deal of admiration for the Swiss. This is possibly the most stable country in the world, not to mention the cleanest. Ok, so they're a money loving nation - and, as you know, I could hardly be fanatical about that - but at the same

time they don't like to show off their wealth, which I appreciate. Oh the image still exists, of course, it's just that the depiction is of a more rational, responsible and educated lifestyle - don't waste, don't squander, be thorough, be efficient. Give them time and I'm sure they'll degenerate to the same extent as the rest of us, but for the time being, at least, as images go it's a manageable one. Did you know, Mr Byrne, that there are over forty thousand millionaires living in this country and most of them still take the tram to work?"

Byrne grunted. "Probably they just don't want to spend money on petrol."

"Maybe, Mr. Byrne, Maybe!" The scientist chuckled. "But is that such a bad thing after all? A simple tightfistedness it may seem, but count the consequences: less air pollution; better railway services; less traffic congestion and so a lower highway maintenance budget and thus more money going into other areas of public spending, such as education and health. Regardless - you, who are so keen to rush to the defence of democracy, must surely appreciate what must be the purest practice of this philosophy in operation anywhere on the planet. Good God, these people are obsessed with voting and referendums."

"The Swiss have one of the lowest turnouts in the world," Byrne remarked.

"Well yes, but then they're called out to vote more frequently. Look at it this way: by using this process of direct democracy the government passes most of its decision making down to the people, thus those who are concerned by an issue will turn out and vote, and those who are not won't. Why *should* someone who is not concerned with any outcome of a particular referendum make an arbitrary vote, and therefore interfere with the votes of those who are genuinely interested? The point is that the option is, at least, there. The power does belong to the people, and an intelligent and informed people at that.

"I hate to shock or disillusion you with my enthusiasm, Mr. Byrne, but this is a positive utopia for me, compared to the rest of the world. I even like the politicians! They don't spend all their time arguing like ours do - well there's little to argue over when the people have made

most of the domestic decisions for themselves. Can you imagine that? All the bickering, all the pettiness, all the perverted statistics and scientific denials, all the can't-help-myself-but-to-get-a-quick-jibe-at-the-opposition-in-no-matter-how-irrelevant-it-is-to-the-issue, all that anything-but-answer-the-god-damned-question. Christ... Well, the Swiss are streets ahead in that department. And yet, there is one thing. How can I put it? The voyage of inspired discovery, you see, is rarely a product of efficiency and adherence to correct procedure alone. There has to be a certain amount of spontaneity. The Swiss are a little like this computer..." He gestured at a PC on the desk in front of him: a Pentium, Byrne noted, and a notebook at that, with thirty-two megabytes of RAM, a colour TFT display, a one gigabyte removable hard disk, CD-ROM drive, PCMCIA fax modem, sixteen-bit stereo sound card with built in twin speakers and microphone, and a clock speed of one hundred and thirty three megahertz. Nice. But he had seen the successor. "They achieve much by way of efficiency," Weinstein continued, "but they are hardly known for their originality or invention."

The scientist had noticed Byrne's private appreciation of the system and so now he assumed a new topic. "The new age of information," he exclaimed, patting the keyboard appreciatively, "Isn't it inspiring?! Everything at your fingertips. Everything at the touch of a key; all at the swirl and click of a mouse. So long as you know how to work the damn thing, that is. Have you noticed the panic? Have you noticed how all those who so smugly ridiculed the 'nerds' and the 'boffins' for knowing about computers are now shitting themselves as they realise the things are here to stay and they don't know a thing about them? Ha! They will come to be mentioned in the same breath with those who scorned evolution theory and the idea of the world being round. I have no time for them. Is it such an enormous feat of deductive reasoning to conclude that a device which saves both time and money at the cost of a small amount of study will establish itself securely in the framework of our future? I think not. Ah, but then again I think. Never mind. Narrow-mindedness is hardly a new phenomena to society, although it's pleasant to see for once the narrow-minded themselves receiving the full sting of their own ignorance. Alright, I

will admit to a certain fondness of the musty bouquet of a golden page, and I do like the feel of a book. But, for all its aesthetic advantages, Mr Byrne, the book, as a means of conveying up to date information is an obsolete concept and growing evermore so with each day that passes. Things happen quickly in this world and he who relies only on books for his information is going to find himself permanently lagging behind the likes of us who are hot on the heels of advancement. I don't want to know about something two years after it occurs, I want to know about it now. And I want pictures. I want data. I want hypertext links to other relevant reading. It used to take me weeks at a time, sometimes, to get a book through from the library when I was at Oxford - now I can have my hands on the information I need within the hour. The time saving on research is just incredible."

Byrne thought, *Christ, does this bastard go on*, and said, "Yes, well, I expect you're right. Don't know much about this internet thing myself, I'm afraid. We've only just got 'round to putting all our products on a database, come to that. It's not that I'm technophobic, you understand, it's just that I can never seem to find the time to keep up with it all. I do work very long days. Anyway, I'd heard the internet's a bit, well, dodgy. Pornography and all that. Propaganda. How do you know if what you're reading's true or not? Wouldn't it be better to wait for a book to come out that you know to be accurate?"

"A valid criticism, Mr Byrne," said Weinstein eagerly, "but of people, not of the system. One can little more criticise the internet for its content than one can criticise paper for the words that have been written on it. The only factors which separate the two are matters of cost and convenience: electronic publishing costs virtually nothing and, once published, your material can be accessed from almost anywhere in the world by anyone, *the moment it's published*. The best part of this is that profitability is not a factor of publication, since it costs you nothing and returns you nothing, leading to minority interests that might rarely have seen paper print springing up in discussion newsgroups and home pages. The worst part of this is that literally anyone can publish on the internet and whatever they like. There is no censorship. There is no regulation. To achieve either of these would be like examining every sheet of paper in the land. Don't

confuse the issues, Mr Byrne: the internet liberates information, but it doesn't liberate the truth. All the same pitfalls of paper and papers are there, and greater there than ever.

"Why only yesterday I was reading about the holocaust. Did you know, Mr. Byrne, that the whole thing was made up? Six million Jews just upped and offed to Israel under new identities, and, of course, because they didn't tell anyone they were going we all just assumed they'd been murdered - well one would, wouldn't one? Easy mistake to make, all things considering. All this holocaust stuff, you see, is just post war propaganda against the Nazis, who were nice people really. The so-called 'gas chambers' were built after the war by the polish authorities as tourist attractions, and any so-called 'survivor' that tells you any different is just a lying bastard. It's all the work of these anti-Christ, race mixing Jews who think that by slandering the names of decent white patriots the way will be paved for the faggots and niggers to come in and soil our culture with all their perversions.

"Or so I read. And then I read a little about philately."

Weinstein stabbed out his cigarette and smiled suddenly. He dropped the but into the ash. "An interesting thing, this phenomenon," he said, pleasantly, "Fascism. Interesting on many planes. It's widely regarded as the biggest evil, yet I ask you: who is the more evil out of the active fascist and the active thief? Think about it, Mr Byrne - the fascist kills many more than the thief, but he's firmly convinced that this is morally justified; the thief might kill just the odd few here and there that get in his way, but he's under no illusions that to do so is righteous. The thief serves himself, whereas the fascist serves his fellow fascists and fascist law. The fascist believes he's good, whereas the thief knows he's bad - and just doesn't give a damn. It seems to me that fascism should be redefined as the greatest *ignorance* rather than the greatest evil. Ah, but wait - would not such a definition require some rather uncomfortable re-categorisations? I mean firstly there's the perfectly abhorrent whiff of an implication that indifference could somehow be therefore suggested as a kind of evil - and perish the thought there! And secondly, fascism would never be the same without the evil, would it? After all, there's no excuse for evil - evil is evil - but ignorance, well...

it's not exactly *unforgivable*, is it? Upbringing, social background... the whole thing sort of starts to become more woolly. But, most importantly of all, the 'evil' label is the one thing that stopped us from noting the obvious comparisons to be made between our behaviour and theirs - 'evil,' they tell us, is a unique state of mind, a non-accidental psychology into which the normal person could have no insight. Whereas 'ignorance' is something we can all associate with. You see? There's nothing unique about fascism, Mr Byrne, it's merely an extreme exemplification of simple ignorance and simple narrow mindedness. The 'evil' part obscures that dreadful fact from public view. And it's dreadful because it brings that pointing finger right back to little old us. *Our* societies and *our* ways are responsible and *we* have to change if it's ever to stop.

"Listen to them go on and on. If ignorance were a smell the very air would positively reek. *An unemployed man is a lazy bastard. New age travellers are delinquents. All men are pigs. All socialists are yobs or all Tories are sleaze balls. Fashion is important. Status is important. Being normal is important. Being non-conformist is important. He who does not agree is a communist or a witch or a demon. Or square. Or a loser. Computer literates are nerds. Science fiction is shit. Disco is shit. Rock music is shit. The world is shit. Drugs are great and anyone who tells you otherwise just doesn't know what they're talking about. And the holocaust never happened and anyone who tells you otherwise is just a lying bastard.* Leaves of the same tree, Mr Byrne, output of the same machine. Their only purpose is to close down conversations and minds, to maintain the status quo and to prevent the unthinkable self-questioning. They achieve nothing. And why do we entertain such defiant claims? Do none of us think about the words in our mouths? Do none of us attempt to see another point of view or to respect another point of view? No, Mr Byrne, because none of this is about the truth or democracy or freedom of speech: this is just about victory, this is just about quashing the opposition; *the words don't matter so long as they win.* So pick a statement, and one to which you can cling through thick and thin. It must be short. It must be clear. It must be one held also by a relatively appreciable number of other people. And it must

must must be unfalsifiable. Nobody can *prove* that unemployed people aren't lazy, because how do you define lazy? Nobody can prove that a new age traveller isn't delinquent because a spotlessly clean record only implies that he's too cunning to be caught. They can *deny* your proposal, of course, but at this point you note the length of their hair or that they haven't shaved today and conclude wisely that someone of this appearance *would* say something like that. It doesn't matter - he's a slob, he's a yob, he's a hippy, he's a suit, she's a smoker, he's a twat, she's a tart, he's an old fart... or whatever. The point is, they're obviously wrong *and you are right*. Forget the content of their argument, see what else you can get them on.

"Group behaviour, Mr Byrne - it's part of our nature as a species to associate with others like ourselves. Skin colour, nationality, religion, social class, sexuality, politics, age, intellect, favourite football team... 'We've something in common,' we say, as if that explains it all, but what we really mean is 'they don't threaten me.' In every new situation we encounter we try to group as quickly as possible, looking for comfort and protection by choosing the subjects most like ourselves from the selection available and exaggerating the unifying detail's importance to us in so doing. The English abroad, for example, will flock together like sheep rather than socialise with the locals and England and english things in general becomes a conversational topic of suddenly immense importance. An English hating French man and a French hating Englishman are suddenly 'Europeans' when they run into each other in, say, Romania and they've no other more identifiable company, and swap the French man for an American and the subsequent group is 'English Speakers.' (As an aside, Mr Byrne, I've always been fascinated by the idea of taking a young neo-fascist and a black, Jewish homosexual and abandoning them together on an alien planet populated by hideous man-eating aliens. How do you think they'd get along?)"

Weinstein leaned forward and grasped the air with his fists. "*Belonging*," he said, "this is what's important - not the truth or the morality of the group's identity. Perhaps the member who belongs to few or no other groups takes the cause more seriously than those who belong to many - take the neo-fascist, for example, who's typically a

young man experiencing great difficulty making friends or fitting in - so it's really no surprise to find him so extremely dedicated to fascism when this, after all, becomes virtually the only network of care and support he has: losing it would leave him with nothing. The threat of expulsion is the driving force that keeps most groups together. Just as it's important to belong it's also important for others not to belong. Your finger's glued to the throbbing pulse of fashion now, but will it be so tomorrow? You're only as good as you last outfit, after all - a single mistake could spell the end in the populations which, after all, are out to compete visually. Or maybe the group's number has swelled a little since the early days and looking to lose a few members... and can afford to be a little more, well, choosy. You never know, eh? John's been out on the beer with the same lot every friday night now for the past three years, and then Linda comes along and John misses not one night, but two *and within the same month*; heads begin to shake, comparisons start to be made; before long favour has become a member lighter. Nothing unifies a group like a target, Mr Byrne. Why? Because every member knows that, so long as all the attention's focused over there, he's in no danger of been thrown out himself. But it's more than that: sometimes the target is the instigator of the group itself. I remember from my childhood a small gang of boys in my class who took great pride in ridiculing the inevitable girl that stinks of urine. Her name was Vissors, I recall, and this single word was the basis of their entire group culture. Outside, in the schoolyard, they'd scream the word as loud as possible, as if volume itself was hilarity personified; within the classroom the joke was to mutter the word and as frequently as possible, at a level audible only to Vissors and the rest of the children, but not, of course, to the teacher. Of course the more they took the piss, Vissors - I forget her first name - pissed herself all the more, and worse and worse it got. Eventually the girl was so scared to come to class she had to be moved to another school. And then what happened? Then the boys had to *elect* a new Vissors. Without their target, you see, their group was nothing - they had nothing in common any more and no reason to stay together. Vissors *defined* their group. So a rather plump little girl called Arbuckle became the new 'Vissors' - she didn't stink of piss, but

her clothes were shabby and, at the time, she had a headlice problem. The original Vissors killed herself about eleven years later, due, they said, to a clinical depression brought on by chronic loss of self-esteem and 'Vissors two - the fat one,' as her successor became known, was bulimic by the age of twelve and remained so for just enough years to ruin her education completely. All of the boys, I might add, ended up cutting 'respectable' figures of society in their average, but adequate positions. None of them I would presume to be aware of the chain of events they set in motion. Mention the word 'Vissors' to them and I expect their eyes would mist over as they gaze fondly into their mischievous past. Boys will be boys. Kids will be kids. 'The good old days,' I'll wager. Tell them the rest and they'll say, professionally, that they're sorry to hear that - that it's a terrible thing - but that they can't really see how they were to blame. *Kids*, you know? Just kids' stuff. The problem must have been there right from the start. Well before they came along. Poor Vissors. They tut. Press the point after that and watch out for the personal attack.

"Kids' stuff? Boys will be boys? Are we really that much better when we grow up, or is it just that we become more cunning? The percentage of *dedicated* racists in our societies is small, but the percentage that privately harbours a secret grudge is enormous. They don't come out with it, of course, because they know what the penalties would be. A stray comment in the workplace these days can lose you your job, after all. No job, no money, no possessions, no status, no life. So you shut the hell up. But groups still form. They surround us. They're everywhere, from the classes and professions right through to the particularly ironic 'non-conformist' groups, whose members go out of their way to dress and act in as radical a way as possible so they can keep in with their non-conformist friends. The one unifying characteristic of all these groups is how they accept a new opinion, and that all depends on who presents it. If it's a valued group member it'll be accepted unquestioningly, if it's an outsider or a member of a target group it will be ignored, rejected and usually ridiculed. *Truth doesn't matter*. The fascists reject jews unthinkingly, the socialists reject conservative policies unthinkingly, the workers reject employers unthinkingly, the capitalists reject taxation

unthinkingly, the fashionable reject the unfashionable unthinkingly, the employed reject the unemployed unthinkingly, the spiritualists reject science unthinkingly and - yes Mr Byrne, to my immense and embarrassed chagrin - scientists reject spiritualism unthinkingly. We don't listen. We don't consider. We don't care. Accepting an outsider's opinion is too much like deferring to them, too much like losing to them; too damn much like admitting they're better than us. And what would the others think if they found out? There's just too much at stake, don't you see?"

Weinstein broke off to light another cigarette. But then he didn't resume. He sat a while in silence and watched the dancing smoke twist its way towards the yellowed ceiling. Byrne wondered if it was his turn to talk now. But what could one say to this man, when one moment he could fill the room with his emotion and drama and the next, as now, seem so calm and indifferent as to barely be aware of any words that had passed. How did one pitch one's remark, let alone select the words with which to fill it? Now the scientist sat with the slightest of smiles on his lips. "Don't worry, Mr Byrne," he said, and the smile widened, "You wouldn't be the first to find such propositions... surprising. Paints rather a grim picture, doesn't it? Greed. Ignorance. Aggression. It's not exactly how we think of ourselves, is it? Not quite the... image we entertain. Ah, *image*. There we go again. Our old friend image. Where does that come in, I wonder. What do you think?"

I'm not going to be drawn into this, thought Byrne, *don't encourage him*. "All a bit conspiratorial for me, old chap," he said, "this whole image-ignorance thing of yours sounds too much like some sort of sinister alien plot to take over the world than reality. Surely if the problem's as widespread as you make it out to be it'd be, well, recognised. Forgive my frankness, but I doubt that your average man in the street would have the faintest idea of what you're talking about."

"But of course they don't know. That is rather the point I was driving at. The great, grand image of a civilised and virtuous society can be found a million times over if one ever feels the approach of the pangs, shall we say, of doubt - from the newspapers' daily crusades of

justice to the company director in the commercial who tells his underlings that prices must drop and quality must rise *even further still*, driving each word into the mahogany conference table with the point of his right index finger. Driver's airbags. Advances in medicine. More family outings than you could fit into a lifetime. Oh you don't have to look hard to have it confirmed for you that things and people are generally ok. But then truths and secrets are rarely to be found floating about in the public domain now, are they, Mr Byrne? Eh? Just because you can't see more than an inch in front of your nose doesn't mean to say there's nothing beyond it. And if you honestly believe the human mind to be so honest an entity that the nice thoughts available for your inspection are the only ones therein... Have you never heard of the subconscious? Have you never heard of rationalisation? Id? Ego? Do these terms mean nothing to you? You might cite X as being the reason for your behaviour, you might even *believe* X as being the reason for your behaviour, but that doesn't mean to say that X has anything to do with it. The mind lies more to you in a lifetime than ever does a single man. You must be prepared to challenge it, to question it on any and every viewpoint if ever you're to lead a life that is even approaching honest. Of course it's hard. Of course it's difficult. But it is right.

"Hypnotism," said the scientist suddenly, "now there's a good example. Demonstrative." He leapt out of his seat with surprising speed and started scanning a row of blue-spined paperbacks on the far wall, third shelf from the top. Pelicans, of course. 'Hypnosis: Fact and fiction' by F L Marcus was the eventual choice. Weinstein's touch on the cover was loving. He opened it and pointed out the paragraph. Byrne read the following:

AN UNUSUAL INCIDENT

The following incident happened to the writer when he was in the midst of an experiment. What took place was as follows: an extremely competent but plain-looking girl, who will be called A, had been supervised by the writer in hypnotic work, and then allowed to carry out such work

alone. One of the subjects in this experiment who showed all the phenomena of deep hypnosis, including post-hypnotic amnesia, was an extremely good-looking girl who was popular with the opposite sex. This subject will be known as B. On one occasion, as happens sometimes for reasons largely inexplicable, her usual post-hypnotic amnesia was absent and she remembered everything that had transpired. It was this event which brought B in great anger to the writer. The story, as she told it, was as follows: A, the plain-looking girl, had given B, the good looking girl, a post hypnotic suggestion to the effect that whenever B went out on a date she would also get a date for A. In short they would double date. B had done this thinking that she was doing it of her own accord in order to get better acquainted with A with whom she was working (as has been noted (ch. V), this tendency to give reasons for one's behaviour, to rationalise, is quite typical of the reaction to post-hypnotic suggestion). To make a long story short, the hypnotic work of A with B was abruptly terminated by the writer. If B had not felt free to bring this matter to the attention of the writer, it might have had unpleasant consequences.

"We like to box such phenomena as hypnosis off into little rooms where only certain people venture," said Weinstein, "but the reality is that there is a very fine line indeed, if at all, between hypnosis and everyday susceptibility. The great, grand image is the greatest hypnotist of them all. Do you begin to see the processes at work, Mr Byrne? The air is thick with them, like radio waves."

"Wait a minute," said Byrne, convinced he had a logical point, and rather pleased with it at that, "this is all a little, well, 'unfalsifiable,' isn't it? You're claiming that all people are acting on some sort of hidden agenda - how can anyone prove that such an agenda doesn't exist?"

"Look, Mr Byrne... " Weinstein sighed. "There is a difference between saying something solely because it prevents you from having

to think any further and saying something because you *have* thought - and thought and thought and thought - and can find no other thing to say. I wasn't saying that unfalsifiable statements are inherently bad, I was criticising the people who use them for the wrong reasons. And, as it happens, there's plenty of empirical research to back my propositions up. Group behaviour, for example, is a well-researched field of psychology: it's a little 'watered down' compared to my own personal wording, granted, but the elements are essentially the same. Technically, yes, it's unfalsifiable, but then proving that *anything* doesn't exist is a theoretical impossibility. How do you prove that the Loch Ness monster doesn't exist? How do you prove that Santa Claus doesn't exist? You can only look and say that you haven't found X, but perhaps you weren't looking hard enough. 'No scientific evidence...' yes? But one doesn't try to dispute the existence of the Loch Ness monster when the Loch Ness monster's been found. And, accordingly, when there is evidence to suggest that group behaviour does indeed describe the patterns I've just outlined, there seems little point in pursuing an argument that denies it."

There was a pause. An opportunity for a change of subject, perhaps? Byrne said, and it was surely entirely reasonable curiosity, after all, "you never did get round to telling me how you were going to solve the 'money problem'."

"Did I say that *I* was going to be the instigator? I don't recall that, Mr. Byrne."

"Ok. Science then. You said that science was going to destroy the monetary system."

"Yes. Quite right. Well it's entirely logical, when you think about it. Nobody funded the creation of the universe or the development of life. There is enough energy and matter around us to supply all our needs, it's just a question of understanding that prevents our using it fully."

"But you said about science providing everything money can buy."

"Does that excite you, Mr. Byrne? Fancy a new Porshe, do you, or a big, swank mansion with a built in bar and billiard table? But where would it end? Once you'd collected every material object it was possible to possess what would you do next? All the excitement of

the purchase would be gone. There'd be no point in it any more. You'd no longer be able to distinguish yourself from the guy next door just by buying things. It's an interesting predicament, don't you think? Useful as a thought experiment if nothing else. Think of it, Mr. Byrne: society, as we know and hate it, would be at an end. Forever. Money would be absolutely and totally meaningless. Power would be absolutely and totally meaningless. What would people do?"

Byrne saw at last what this was all leading to. And the words came to him. "They'd kill each other," he said.

Pure joy erupted across the scientist's face. "Ah, at last! Maybe I'm not just a crank after all, eh? Yes, Mr. Byrne. They would kill each other. Ruthlessly and mercilessly. And leave them to it, say I."

CHAPTER SEVEN

SCIENCE SHALL HAVE ITS REVENGE

"THE HUMAN race is fast approaching a punishment long overdue," continued Weinstein. "This arrogant aggressiveness has prevailed for far too long; now it will be the making of its own destruction. With the consumer culture wiped out in a single move people will start buying causes instead of objects: something new to believe in, something new to give their lives meaning. They won't turn to science or art or humanitarian causes; or anything, for that matter, which requires a modicum of thought or a widening of perspective - they'll turn instead to all those opinions of theirs which grudgingly they had repressed for the sake of correctness whilst money was a necessity. Religious, territorial, class and racial wars will break out, to name but a few, and when the dust has settled we can all breathe a huge sigh of relief and get on with the work that has to be done. Science shall have its revenge, Mr Byrne. We've put up with this for centuries and all of our attempts to be accommodating have been thrown back in our face with a flippancy that is no less than insulting. *We are lazy. We are inefficient. We aren't profitable enough. We aren't productive enough.* Now, at last, the fat cats will see for themselves how it is to be treated as a unit and to cry for help upon deaf ears."

"Just a minute," Byrne said hastily, "I was following *your* logic and *your* cynicism. I didn't say I agreed with you."

"Oh come on! Come on! Who are you defending? You *know* that this is true. You can feel it. What virtues are there to protect in all of this? Money? Greed? Corruption? Fight it man! Fight it! *This is the world we live in.*"

"People," muttered Byrne, "are more adaptable than you think."

"No they're not. Look at the last two decades: the technological advancements in the western world in this time have been amazing, but I haven't seen the people changing likewise. They've got worse: my people are even more caught up in their pathetic movie fantasy of life, and yours have found even more things to moan about. We've seen capitalism spreading across the globe like a rash in the last few years, demolishing the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union in its relentless stomp, and *this* is hailed as an advancement: it's no advancement, Mr. Byrne, the people are no better off - in most cases they're worse off now than ever they were before; the only 'advancement' has been in our own peace of mind and in our pockets. Now we can sell things to them that we couldn't sell before: soft drinks, junk food, films and glossy television - all important prerequisites of an advanced and civilised society, of course. And now we can get them to work for us for pittance wages and a psuedo-sense of important identity. Advancement? All we've achieved is to fool yet more people into believing that the self is the only thing worth looking out for. All we've done is con."

"My people," Byrne said angrily, "might well be moaners, but when it's necessary we will unify into a ferocious and magnificent whole. One of the biggest mistakes the Nazis made in the war was to think they could overwhelm us, and all they did was the opposite. That spirit is still there, Mr. Weinstein, and when the need arises we will be unbeatable once again."

Weinstein sighed and smiled. "And you are all so hopelessly nostalgic. Yes yes yes, Mr Byrne. One enemy, one group. Naturally. We covered that in the group behaviour bit: nothing unifies a group... etc, etc. Only this time there will be no *one* target. This time there will be no *one* aggressor. There will be no *aggressor*! Nobody will *have* to take up arms and fight or sign their name along a cause's dotted line. They'll fight because there'll be nothing stopping them. They'll fight because everyone else is fighting. *They'll fight because it's fun*. Oh I've no doubt that comradeship within the individual groups will come to be fashionable once again - until the paranoia stage, of course - and I'm sure that the 'enemies' will be taken very seriously as enemies and deadly enemies in every proper sense of the

words, but don't fool yourself for a minute into thinking it'll be just like the good old days. It will be chaos. It will be hell. And those with any intelligence will see it coming a mile off and get the hell out, whilst they can. I will feed, house and clothe any man or woman who turns their back on it all and walks away. I have the resources. I offer them willingly. So you see, Mr Byrne: it's not a *must*, it's a *choice*."

Damn this man for his arrogant intolerance. Byrne, furious, stared fixedly at the table and tried to formulate a riposte. What could he get him on? Then he reminded himself of his duty and forced himself to look into the scientist's gaze and to smile. Condescendingly. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I just can't see it. The means, that is. Perhaps you're right about people - I really wouldn't know - but are we talking theoretically here or is this something that's really going to happen and soon? Have you some sort of a machine or something? If you have, I'd like to see it. Perhaps then I'd understand you better."

Weinstein smiled a knowing smile. "We shall reach that point of no return later, Mr. Byrne. First let me tell you a little bit about myself. My life story is not exceptional, but perhaps I have succeeded exceptionally. You might find it interesting. I'm sure you must be curious."

He drained the last of his coffee and settled himself in his chair to compose himself for the change of subject. Inwardly, Byrne sighed with despair. Yet more talk. Yet more waiting. When would the time for action come?

"I was born the son of a doctor and a physicist," Weinstein began, "My father was a respected gynaecologist, and my mother a lecturer and researcher in physics at the University of Chicago. We lived in a comfortable suburb, where we had a large house filled with well chosen furniture and appliances, a back yard full of flowers and a garage with a basketball net screwed into it. It was one of those grassy-verged neighbourhoods where the sidewalks keep a good three feet from the street at all times, just to be on the extra safe side. Our own little patch of it consisted mostly of white collar workers with wives and children and dogs and station wagons. 'Friendly folk,' they were - everyone knew everyone within the established framework and a trip across the grass to the mailbox of an evening would always see

you into a conversation on the general state of affairs. I was a quite kid. Shy, I suppose, but I had my friends. What set me apart, I think, was that I never got into sports the way most other kids of my age did. And I used to read a lot. I read Jules Verne and Robert Louis Stephenson and Arthur Conan Doyle and H G Wells. And then one day a friend sneaked out some of his big brother's comic books for us to read and that was the catalyst that exploded my imagination. Science fiction. Fantasy. It was the *ideas* that so captivated me.

"In those days I used to lie in bed at night and daydream adventures until I slept: adventures of fantastic machines and fantastic locations; space adventures, sea adventures, adventures in haunted houses, adventures where I'd been somehow endowed with super powers and adventures that dabbled with contorted combinations of all of these scenarios. I used to write my own stories. *I used to think.*

"I was born a perfectionist. Let me give you an example: any construction of mine from blocks, so I'm told, had to be *exactly* lined up - all the blocks had to be perfectly placed, one upon another - or I would scatter the whole thing across the room in rage. And this streak of mine had a substantial effect on my fantastic little reveries: the more I entertained a particular daydream setting, the more dissatisfied I became with it as I discovered logical imperfections within its fabric. And my little plots began to falter. What would start out defiantly an adventure of glory would become inevitably stuck somewhere and sidetracked into a contemplation over something or another. Superman could fly, they said, because he came from another planet where the gravity was heavier - ok, great, but how did that explain such additional features as x-ray vision and ice-cold breath, and how did that explain his being able to breath in space, for Christ's sake: that part really used to annoy me. And then my mom taught be about equal and opposite reactions and so even the flying bit fell to pieces: how could he move in the air if he didn't produce a thrust of some sort? I mean, he just stands there with his arms held out in front of him and then he just somehow takes off. Did he therefore have some sort of telekinetic powers he was unaware of? Questions questions questions, you see. Pointless questions, maybe, but questions nonetheless. Of course I was aware that these were

fabricated fictions never intended to be taken seriously, but the shoddy explanations glossed over the wheres and hows and whys and irritated me by their lack of care and attention.

"Don't underestimate such thinking. At school I was top of my year and my success was entirely due to this obsession for logical inspection born of pulp and perfectionism. I was never prepared, you see, just to learn a set of facts by rote and accept them merely as facts: black boxes never were and never will be a fancy of mine. I felt compelled to discover and to understand all the underlying causes and processes and to see how they all fitted in with one another in the great grand scheme of things. Facts were never just facts to me but *symptoms*, if you like. It was never enough for me to comprehend only part of the puzzle, I would rather have known none of it.

"But it's most important of all for you to understand that I genuinely believed in a beautiful simplicity of society in those days, and I was in no doubt whatsoever as to its essential benevolence. I realised, of course, that it had its rough edges, but then what didn't? Through my eyes, through my own bedroom window, there was a place and value for everything. Good had a certain feel to it, and bad a certain way of behaving. And people who were mostly good, but occasionally bad, were usually only bad because someone or something had provoked them. Well I wouldn't perhaps had put it quite like that, had somebody asked me. I can only now attempt to squeeze into words assumptions that were never linguistically formed. Of course I had been conditioned. How else does a child learn of society other than through his parents' eyes? I did not contemplate society. I did not even contemplate contemplating society. I would never have seen the virtue in an endeavour to repaint society then, nor the truth. Do you understand, Mr. Byrne? I could accept ignorance and wickedness and lethargy and effort and intelligence all as pieces of the same world, but through no thought of my own. For all my logic and reasoning I never once considered a questioning of my parents' categories of person.

"I was first to realise my naivety on a rather wet day in the fall of my second year at high school. It was a cruel day and a turning point in my life: one of those days when your normality is ripped away

from you and never to return. I'm very rarely sick, but I was on that day and I broke my routine because of it. My father's clinic, you see, was just a few minutes walk from school and I would ordinarily study for an hour after the other kids had left upon the meandering route of the school bus and then walk over for a ride home; on this day I walked over early, seeking sympathetic nature I suppose. When I got there I was surprised to find the place deserted - no patients were waiting and the secretary seemed to have gone home early. So I went to the door of my father's office and I was about to knock when I heard noises from within - a low and rhythmic grunting accompanied by a higher pitched pant of the same beat. I paused, contemplated awhile and then, checking first that no-one had silently entered the waiting room in my presence, knelt down and peered through the keyhole. I could only make out part of the scene, but it was enough - a man with his pants around his feet was thrusting into the folds of a woman's skirt.

"In my father's office. I was outraged. Perhaps my innocence saw its demise approaching and made a last ditch attempt to fool me, for I truly believed in that minute that someone had somehow got into that room whilst my father was out on some errand or another. I took a seat at a distance from the door that would suggest me to have been out of the audible range of this misdemeanour should the culprits emerge before my father's return, and embarked upon a logical investigation of the facts that I had witnessed, even priding myself on my calmness as I did so. So then, the secretary had gone home early - I reasoned that she must have been ill. Hadn't dad once said she came to work each day by bus? It was a good ten minutes to the nearest stop and it was raining - perhaps, then, dad had taken her home in his car. Perhaps she'd had an accident, even, and he'd had to rush her to hospital, forgetting to lock up the building in his haste. It all made sense. It all made perfect sense. This young couple of lovebirds must have just wandered in and taken advantage of an opportunity. No respect. No consideration. No self-discipline whatsoever. Degenerates, obviously. And as I reached this conclusion I grew suddenly afraid of its implications: what if they did come out before my father returned - might they be dangerous? What would they do to

me if they suspected I had overheard them? And I wondered if it might be best to leave - whilst I still could!

"If I had left, Mr Byrne, I would probably be a different person entirely today, for that was the day that started off a chain of events which would ultimately define me as the man you see before you. But I remained. I remained because I was more scared of what they might do to my father, should he walk in on them unwarned, than of what they might do to me. Such innocence. Such virtue. And it was wiped away in an instant when my father finally walked out of his office: my father and a woman of half his age.

"Horror gripped me. For the first infinite second I was struck with an overwhelming sense of emptiness. And then I grew afraid. In a moment my father had turned from a man whose every sentence was predictable into a complete stranger, and who was I to know what he would do next? At first his greeting was no different from the usual: 'Hello Don,' he said, as he always said; but then he looked at his watch and added, 'you're early.' His look changed, and terror overcame me. It was not just a fear of him, it was a fear for the image of him that still persisted in me. I had seen a different man through the keyhole, and I did not want to meet him face to face. Not yet. That would be like his death somehow. I wanted him to lie to me and act like the father I knew.

"And he said, 'You look ill Thomas'

"'I don't feel too well today,' I stammered, 'I couldn't study'

"'Well, we'd better get you home then son,' he replied.

"My relief at this normality was enormous. And yet the normality itself was sinister. How easily those words had slipped from his lips! *This was my father*, my father who had always been above suspicion, and even consideration of suspicion! How many times then had he lied so effortlessly to me before? I sat in silence on the way home, masked by my malady, and in total confusion and despair. The world, as I understood it, had been thrown into complete disarray. It was not just my father who had crumbled before me, but everything he conveyed. He himself had taught me never to trust a liar, so how could I believe in him and everything he had told me now? From every angle, from every perspective, my life appeared a total sham.

"The worry weakened me considerably and, with my defences lowered, the sickness I had caught took advantage of me. For several days I remained in bed with a fever, and my mother took time off from her work to care for me. And how pathetic I felt for that: in my determined silence I was surely but an aide to my father's violation of her very essence. But how could I speak? Did I have the right to ruin her life with a few vulgar words, and would not such an act be as sinful as my restraint? And yet the guilt went deeper than that. Essentially and ultimately I just did not want my life to change so dramatically: even a continuing deception would surely be better than that. I *was* part of the lie, therefore: my silence was mostly for my own selfish reasons.

"I took steps to try to ensure that I would never again come into contact with this repulsive and dangerous truth. For example, I started to take the bus home each night in order to avoid going to my father's clinic. It was as if I thought that by avoiding this reality I might not have to worry about it anymore. But the truth remained. In fact it got worse. Relieved of his hometaking duty my father started to stay back late at work, from time to time, claiming a backlog of paperwork on each occasion. Never before would I have doubted such words, but now I saw deception and fraudulence behind his every comment. I began to dread my mother finding out, and the consequent destruction of my very stability. In fact I substantially increased my own share of the lie, to this end, by consistently changing the subject if ever she mentioned to me her husband's lateness, in order to break a potentially suspicious chain of thought. And the guilt plagued and hounded me. And the reality would not go away.

"My thoughtfulness, you see, had been my downfall in this incident - and was also to be my saviour. Had I not been of a thoughtful disposition I would probably have succeeded in fooling myself into believing that the truth is sometimes best avoided. But being as I was I felt compelled to investigate the implications further. And the implications were dreadful. After a while I began to wonder how many of the other 'respectable' people I had met concealed similar alter egos, and then I contemplated the whole notion of respectability

itself. Slowly I began to open my eyes to the *real* world, and the inherent truths of mankind gradually began to reveal themselves to me.

"I reached my first conclusions rapidly. Respectability, I judged, was measured more by image and status than by effort and personality. A well-dressed and well-spoken man, who adhered to all the norms of society, was most likely to be judged respectable: the majority of people would not consider looking further than that. But a person not conforming to such rules would be regarded with suspicion, and then condemned for trivialities that would barely blemish the reputation of someone 'respectable'. If a respectable man swore, for example, it would most likely be an outlet of tension; if an unrespectable man swore it would merely confirm his suspected uncouthness. I found that people were concerned more with *what* a person did, rather than *why* he did it; or rather that the *why* would most often be derived from the *what*, and often incorrectly. The whole workings of respectability were therefore little more than a vicious circle: a person's state of respectability would be firstly assumed by his outward appearance and status, and then his consequent actions would be interpreted to confirm this assumption, whatever they might have been; and so on. Thus one person could reach entirely the wrong conclusion about another, and yet consider their judgement a wholly logical one. This process of deduction was apparently called 'common sense,' however I could see it as little more than blatant narrow-mindedness.

"And so I came to realise that the whole of suburban life was not at all the civilised triumph that I had always considered it to be - and, indeed, that it should be - but instead a gigantic act of escapist self-indulgence painted to look so. We were all lying to one another; and we were all lying to ourselves. And yet the truth was apparent everywhere: even if one was to avoid the lesser privileged neighbourhoods and ignore the scandals which occasionally would come to light, courtesy of our noble press, one could easily find the purest rudiments of life in the great works of literature and music that adorned so many 'respectable' shelves. But the books and records seemed only to be judged by their creators' expert choices of words or

notes, rather than the actual messages conveyed, and the wisdom within was largely unnoticed.

"The years passed, and always at the back of my mind was my father's misdeed. My initial avoiding of the issue became gradually replaced by an increasing curiosity. Still, I must add, I lived in fear of his exposure, but I had come to realise that his conduct in this affair was by no means clumsy, and that the chances of his being discovered were considerably less than I had first considered. But also I had developed into a different person over this time: my ideas and beliefs had changed immensely during this period of contemplation, so that now I feared not so much the loss of our family identity - for that I had lost already - but merely the comforts I was used to. And so, when my father told us, one morning, that he was going to be late home from work that night, I resolved to turn up at his clinic unannounced that very evening, to see what further scandal I might uncover. My plan was thus: I would pretend to be ill again and seeking parental nurture. I saw no reason as to why this should not acquit me of all suspicion for a second time, especially since the first had been so long ago. But, as it turned out, my cover was unnecessary: this time when I arrived at my father's clinic I found it closed and locked. I could not help but wonder, at first, if my own suspicions had been a little overdone, and that there really were no ulterior motives to my father's late nights, however I determined to leave in no doubt as to his presence there and resolutely made my way round to the back of the building with the intention of looking through his window. The clinic was built on a slope that descended to the railroad behind, so that his window was one floor up. I had to climb onto the rear wall to get myself level, but it placed me just a few feet away and with a clear view.

"It was late fall, and so dark already. The light was on in his room and the curtains were drawn, but for a chink of a few inches. Through this I saw my father naked upon a young girl. At first I couldn't see her properly, but then he thrust his head between her thighs and I could recognise her as one of the juniors of my school - a girl of about fourteen, Mr. Byrne.

"A feeling of sickness and guilt overcame me, and I climbed down

from the wall unsteadily, cursing my curiosity bitterly. How naive I had been to think I was so hardened to the truth. I had never once considered the responsibility towards my father's illicit partners that my knowledge of his deeds carried. The 'mistress figure' had been largely unexplored in my thoughts, aside from an initial desire to believe that it was just the one woman my father was seeing behind my mother's back - *she* was an opportunist, of course, and after his money and status, regardless of his own feelings for her. Two women would have been worse. Three or four women would have been worse still and that was before you got to the possibility of prostitutes. But this! I would have considered the girl too young *for me*. How had this situation developed and, in God's name, *why*?

"But things were yet to worsen. About a week later that very girl was found by her parents hanging from her bedroom ceiling: dead, and - as it turned out - pregnant. The item made a brief two minute slot on the local news, and I remember seeing my father stiffen slightly as it was read. As well he might. But my own guilt was unbearable: had I not determined to remain in such a cowardly silence from the start the poor girl would still have been alive: I shared the responsibility for her death absolutely and I cannot find the words to adequately describe the remorse and self-disgust I felt. And yet, the greatest agony of all was the people's comments on the incident. How little they knew, and how readily they passed judgement! Even my mother found reason to believe that the girl was 'typical of the youth of today,' using the area she had lived in as the basis for her conclusion. Why did they have to comment? Why did they have to judge? Indifference would have been better - and kinder - than this unnecessary condemnation. I was suddenly overwhelmed by the emptiness and cruelty and misery of society, and I became quite depressed. Bit by bit, the meaning seemed to seep out of all that remained dear to me, for every part of my world, it appeared, could be traced back to the filth and the mire somehow. I found myself cast deep into a pit of my own despair and hopelessness. How could I hope to live amongst such ignorant, selfish, aggressive people? How could I possibly hope to act my way through them, and why on earth would I want to bother?

"And finally I decided to take my life and end the suffering completely. It was, I resolved, the most dignified and honourable thing to do. I began to plan it out carefully, torn, initially, between an obvious suicide and one made to appear an accident: the latter would spare my family the anguish of such a death, but would count for nothing; the former would, at least, provide the opportunity of making some form of statement. I decided that if my life was to have any meaning and justification at all I would have to take the first choice, and leave my reasons for all to read and perhaps to learn from. What method of death then? Would a painful and bloody one convince the observant few that my suicide was not an act of weakness and cowardice, or would it suggest that the whole act had been performed on the spur of the moment without due thought, or that I was unsound of mind? Hanging myself would probably infer the event to have been pre-planned, but how would I hang - naked or clothed? For days I sifted through the various options, and eventually I decided to kill myself through an overdose of sleeping tablets, which would suggest thoughtfulness, calmness and a compassionate consideration of my parents' certain grief and shame. I settled upon a reasonable date for the act, and set about making use of the remaining time in drafting out my suicide note.

"The week came and the day came and the hour came, and all my loose ends I considered as tied up as they could be as I sat down to my final few minutes of life. I had made a last tour of my neighbourhood, bidding farewell to all the familiar sights; I had divided up my possessions according to the friends I had determined they were to be left to, and I had made an everyday goodnight to my parents, knowing that this trivial little ritual would be the last words I would ever exchange with them. I had my pills. I had a glass. I had a jug full of water. It is difficult to describe the thoughts that go through one's mind in such a situation, Mr Byrne. It is quite a unique predicament to find oneself in. There is a certain calmness and tranquillity about it that allows rational thought to make a brief reappearance. And in this last nostalgic turning of the rusty cogs of my cognitions I suddenly realised that in fact I was back in control of my life, that this very act meant that I could indeed control my destiny. And with this flash of

understanding my depression lost its hold of me completely. It was beaten, and I had beaten it. And I no longer wanted to kill myself."

CHAPTER EIGHT

DUPLICATION, ETC

WEINSTEIN REACHED for his cigarette, but it lay in the ashtray, dead and un-smoked: a long, thin cylinder of undisturbed ash. He shrugged and lit another.

"Thus, from the cinders of my despair did rise a phoenix of determination," he continued. "It did not take me long, with my powers of thought fully restored to me, to establish the processes which had almost led me to my destruction. My depression had been born of the helplessness I had felt in my impossible situation: a situation created ultimately not by my parents - or by their parents - but by society itself. It was therefore the enormity of the whole problem which had caused me to conclude that my suicide was the only way out. I had felt completely ineffectual against such a formidable beast. But death, I realised now, was not an option that could disappear as a missed opportunity - it would always be there to comfort me and to remind me of my power. Whatever I chose to do or tried to achieve I would always have death as an alternative, and therefore I could never be powerless. I had absolutely nothing to lose in whatever path I decided to follow.

"I had wanted for my suicide to have meaning, but now I realised that what I had really wanted was for my *life* to have meaning. *Meaning*, Mr Byrne. *Identity*. Why settle for a well written suicide note, that would probably only be dismissed by most as the naive ramblings of someone who 'needed help,' when there was so much more that could possibly be achieved? And at the doorway of death I had effectively torn myself free of all of my ties and dispositions and found myself free to start anew, and to conquer. Don Weinstein - 'the

boffin,' 'the dreamer,' *the boy* - really did die that night and I - *I* - was born. So I returned to my studies with a vengeance, determined to excel, and the driving force behind me was the knowledge that I *could* make a difference if I really tried: I *could* change the world. My life, in fact, became devoted to knowledge, because I knew that this was where my potential lay: to physics, to chemistry, to biology, to psychology, to politics; to every morsel I could soak up.

"But I needed a plan. For the first year or so of my new life this objective was unformed and shady. Despite my determination, the 'problem,' as I referred to it, was still enormous from every angle. I needed a simple common denominator - a root to all the many facets that I hated - which I could target and destroy. Ignorance underlay the majority of these, but how did one affect the education of the ignorant masses in a single lifetime? And finally, of course, I realised that money was the essential prop that had to be removed. Everything - all the ignorance, indifference and manipulation - it all came down to money.

"And, in the back of my mind, I was sure I already knew the solution to this somehow. In recent months I had come to the conclusion that my origins of thought had been somewhat misguided, but I determined to return once more to these roots and delved into my old and dusty science fiction magazines to search for something I must have once read. Finally I came across a serial called "The secret of electrical transmission" by Clement Fezandie, an American science fiction writer. The story was about something called 'teleportation' - or, more correctly, matter transmission. Of course I had come across the notion many times since reading this, but in reading the story again my original thoughts, that had been inspired by the novelty of the idea, started to come back to me. Matter transmission, then, is - as the phrase suggests - the actual transmission of matter - physical objects - from one place to another. A person who was 'teleported' from one place to another would vanish from his point of departure and re-materialise at his destination in the time it took the signal to travel there at the speed of light. It is a familiar notion to most people, now that science fiction has become a significant contributor to our western cultures, and the principle is really quite simple.

Essentially such a device would consist firstly of a device which could describe an object and encode it electronically; secondly of a transmitter of some sort to send that information; thirdly of a receiver; and finally of a decoder/re-constructor device that could reassemble the information back into its original form. This logical format already existed in such systems as telephone communication: the describer/encoder would be the microphone in the mouthpiece which converts a person's voice into electrical signals, the transmitter the device which sends these signals down the telephone lines, the receiver the other person's telephone, and the decoder/re-constructor the loudspeaker in their earpiece. And thus a person's voice was transmitted instantaneously. Nowadays, of course, one could draw upon fax machines and electronic mail as useful analogies, but no such technologies were available to my contemplations at this point in my life.

"I was inspired by this idea, but also somewhat confused, for the implications of such a device appeared to me to go somewhat further than mere transmission. In fact I saw transmission only as something of a by product of it - assuredly a useful one, of course. My reasoning was thus: if it was possible to encode an object, and if it was possible to reconstruct that object from this encoded information, why stop at reconstructing it once? Could not such a machine be used to create duplicates? *Exact* duplicates? It struck me as odd that this idea was not as much apparent in the body of science fiction that I was familiar with as was the notion of transmission. Transmission was simply a time effective way of transporting people from A to B, but duplication was something much more than that. Duplication was freedom. Duplication was freedom from money.

"And so this was the starting point of years and years of research, that was not without its problems. I won a scholarship to Oxford with relative ease, but I was dismissed, several years later on the grounds of 'unethical research,' following an accident in which my laboratory assistant was blinded. This 'accident' was due to a fault in my equipment which could not possibly have occurred by chance - for I checked and rechecked these apparatus on a daily basis - and the whole incident reeked of sabotage. My superiors in the faculty, you

see, strongly disapproved of my work and were in need of a good excuse with which to terminate it. I don't know whether they thought it was too fanciful or too dangerous, still this is immaterial. I lost my job and my friend, but I was undeterred. And, by good fortune, my parents had both been killed in a car crash three weeks previously - an event which had failed completely to disturb me, but which was cited, incidentally, as the main reason for my 'negligence' - and I discovered that the liquidation of their estate had left a considerable sum of money for me. I took this plus the savings from my wages - for I had spent very little - and moved over here, where I knew I would be undisturbed.

"The work was intense, but glorious. Can you imagine the pleasure of working alone on so loved a project in so beautiful a land? I was not blind to the fact that I had already achieved an enviable state of satisfaction in my life, but part of the enjoyment of it all was the driving force behind it. Belief that I would succeed was inherent to my happiness.

"With the microchip revolution I saw my goal getting ever closer. I had considered, from an early stage, that the organisational abilities of computing machines would inevitably make them an essential part of my finished invention, if it was to be at all useful on a purely practical scale. Quite apart from anything else, after all, I needed a system which could store and retrieve vast quantities of data quickly and efficiently. And yet the combination of duplicating and computing power was an enormity that even I had hitherto failed to envisage. With the ensuing advancement of software I began to realise that such a marriage of technologies would not only speed up and mechanise a substantially intricate and, therefore, dangerous set of procedures, but would also offer an almost limitless degree of control over matter - *at the molecular level itself*. In essence, Mr. Byrne, one would not only be capable of duplicating objects, but also of manipulating them. Once an item's properties had been encoded it could be edited - in the same way as one might edit a piece of computer music or computer art or a letter even - *before* reconstruction. One could merge the skin of an orange, for example, with the flesh of an apple and then create this hybrid fruit to taste. I decided to call this process "Point And Click

Creation" - or PACC - and the ideal, ultimate realisation of all my goals became the PACC unit: a little duplicating device - theoretical at the time, of course - that, one day, every home would have. The PACC society was a wonderful image, easily enough to keep me going through all the set-backs. I knew that this was my destiny. Think of it, Mr. Byrne: I mean, who would be impressed by a Rolls Royce if anyone could have one? Or a mansion? Or designer clothes? Would not, in fact, the very concept of fashion be dead in such a society? Using the same cars or clothes or whatevers as everybody else could no longer be disguised as anything other than the image and group conformity that it is. People might actually begin to take a pride in expressing their individuality.

"Not long after the official conceptualisation of the PACC unit my work began to show its first signs of real promise. In all truthfulness I could have - *should* have - acted with more reserve at this stage, but such was the thrill of seeing the goal within my grasp that patience got rather brushed aside in favour of quick progress. My funds were running rather low by this stage - almost four years after my moving to Switzerland - and yet foolishly I lavished on myself with expensive equipment that I thought might carry me to my victory a little faster. It did not. By the end of the last decade I was on the verge of completing my first working prototype, but also on the verge of bankruptcy.

"Ah! My victory over the bastard coin would be sweet enough for that moment alone. That light, that golden glow of imminent success was *so close*! How was it possible, how was it *conceivable* that it could be snatched from me? The deeper and deeper into debt I fell the less and less able I became at my work, for the growing probability of failure was just unbearable. My mind locked itself into a lethargy cycle and a cloud of frustration enveloped me, frustration that made me want to explode!

"I suppose it is a measure of one's resilience as to how well one copes in such a situation. Each of us faces a similar crisis, at least once in our lives, where we must face up to the harsh reality and put aside our burning ambitions for the moment, to concentrate on something that might one day allow us to pick them up again. The

only other option is to let the frustration break us into little pieces and that way the goal will never be reached. It is true to say that I was close to this breaking point and perhaps another man, who had not torn all his ties once already in his life, would have given in to it all at this point. But I decided to fight. It was, I think, an evening stroll along the Rhine that brought me to this inevitable decision. It hurt, because partly, after all, it was an admission of defeat and failure, but somehow it was a release. My mind felt free again and so I sat down to think.

"Really the path that I chose was entirely logical. I needed a lot of money. Fast. Any form of legal employment available to me would not have met my financial needs in the time that I had allocated for my period of distraction. My duplicator device could already copy small amounts of matter, so I decided to put this to work for me. With my last reserves of cash I bought samples of all the popular narcotics and duplicated them in bulk. It was a painstaking process, for I could only copy about ten grams a time and then the equipment had to be left an hour, for it to cool properly. Within two months, however, I had five kilograms of cocaine to sell and with the money raised from this I paid off most of my debts. After a second sale I had money left over to invest in new equipment and materials. All those idle moments, you see, had been put to good use: whilst waiting for the set-up to cool I would work on my equations. Free from the impending doom of the debt collectors my mind was perfectly focused, despite the hourly disruptions, and excellent progress was made. My third sale, then, was not five, but twenty kilograms, entirely due to the improvements I had made.

"I continued in this fashion for about two years. In just eighteen months or so of this my duplicating capacity had risen to a staggering three tons and I was a millionaire several times over. By this time I was duplicating arms and explosives for terrorist, criminal and extremist organisations, as well as narcotics. Of course my conscience over my association with such people was clear - I was merely choosing the only available means to an entirely justifiable end and anyway, these were other people's crimes. But I did worry about my detection. I was, after all, an international drugs and arms

dealer of considerable status. I had to be wary of my competitors, let alone the law. I took measures, then, to ensure that my true identity was never revealed to my customers and assumed an invented alias of... Harry Black."

Ever since the word 'teleportation' had entered the conversation, Byrne's mind had been racing through all the possible courses of action he could take. At that moment he had thought, *At last! At last! And he's just telling me! He really is just a silly old scientist!* But now Byrne had to fight to control his composure. This man was Harry Black? Weinstein was the drugs and arms dealer who had twice outwitted and escaped him? Surely not! That meant Ivanescu in Romania had been working for Weinstein. That meant Weinstein knew all about the man called Richard Byrne who had come looking for him then. That meant...

The scientist smiled a wide, wry grin of satisfaction and Byrne felt his blood go cold. He knew. He had known all along. Weinstein said, "Please don't try anything heroic, Mr Byrne. I'm well aware of your abilities - indeed, I have the utmost respect for them - but they will get you nowhere in this room. At the slightest untoward movement my colleague, who is monitoring the situation, will scatter your atoms over the mountain snow. Do we have an understanding? Good. Then I will continue."

But how? *How?* Weinstein looked nothing like Harry Black, or, at least, the pictures Byrne had seen of him. And why had Black been involved in heroin smuggling just a few weeks ago when all of this supposed technology would have made it so much easier for him. And why was Weinstein telling him all this now?

Could all of this be some sort of elaborate bluff? A set up; a trick? Some sort of plan to humiliate the Secret Service? The Russians had tried that one plenty of times before in the old days of the cold war, and gone those days might be but spying in Russia was still an enormous part of the Service's role. *Think about it*, thought Byrne, *the Service's budget and usefulness are under ever increasing scrutiny: if the Russians exposed MI6 spending valuable funds and resources - taxpayers' money - chasing after such fanciful notions as teleportation, the press and the treasury would be on our backs like a*

pack of hounds. It's any old excuse for a budget review these days, as the FSK are no doubt aware. They could rip us to pieces. So Weinstein had been young and gifted and disillusioned with capitalism and American society: what perfect material for KGB recruiting agents! Could they have got to him at Oxford and convinced him that there were other ways of 'making a difference'? And now, a generation later, had someone concocted a new and amusing use for this unique incidental of Weinstein's known past? Perhaps an after dinner conversation had seen the proposal flung into liquor-happy air to catch laughs and attention; perhaps someone had taken it seriously. The intelligence could have been faked. The video could have been doctored. Yes! It was just about possible. And, if this really was Harry Black, what perfect revenge for the man whose plans Byrne himself had twice defeated. Perhaps this very conversation was being recorded on a DAT machine, to be edited where convenient and then posted to a tabloid news desk with an anonymous note to accompany it. And what could Byrne do to stop this chain of events, now that he was here and listening?

"I ceased trading as this man soon after our near confrontation," continued Weinstein, "You see you, personally, were the one that came closest to the truth. You had shaken me. But I had the necessary funds by then and plenty more besides. I bought my supercomputers and a larger residence in Basle in which to house them, and I got down to work on my new, better, faster algorithms."

"Your activities as Harry Black will have caused thousands of deaths," said Byrne.

"I don't doubt that. To be honest, I don't really care. If people will buy drugs then they will buy drugs, if not from me then from someone else. If people did not want drugs then drug dealers would be out of business. It's as simple as that."

"People don't want to be killed by terrorists."

"Indeed. Anyway I worked for several months in complete solitude. The hardware was at a sufficiently advanced stage to be practically useful, but actually using it was a painstaking business. I wrote a unique user interface for it, then, and also a storage compression routine for the vast amounts of data to be stored and manipulated.

That, in itself, was quite a task. Finally I was ready to start work on the ultimate test of my technology, something I knew then to be the first rung of the final ladder." Weinstein waved his hands around him with a sudden, dramatic flourish, "my home."

"Really?" said Byrne, taking care to sound sceptical, "This house? On your... what did you call it... PAT unit?"

"*PACC* unit, Mr Byrne." Weinstein frowned slightly. "It took eight months to design and two hours, fourteen minutes and twenty three point six seconds to build. Everything, right down to the chairs we sit on at this moment, was designed on my perfected system. It was an enormous undertaking. Point and Click Creation involves far more than Computer Aided Design. It's not just a matter of drawing plans and diagrams on a screen - the materials from which the eventual object is to be constructed must all be sampled before you can do that. How many different materials would you consider an average house to contain? Well, there's wood, brick and concrete, to begin with. Then there's glass, plastics, fabrics, metals, papers, paints, ceramics... the list is endless. Each of these materials had to be gathered and their molecular composition digitally sampled. I now have a library of almost thirty thousand such samples on database - and it's still expanding. And all that, I might add, is in addition to the enormous library of actual complete objects I have: one does not make a wall of brick, if I may illustrate this point; one makes a wall of bricks.

"Anyway, I did it. My dream house, Mr. Byrne: with its construction my goal had finally been reached. The elation was indescribable. That was about a year and five months ago, I think. I stopped after that and made myself rest. I decided to go on holiday." Weinstein smirked. "It was rather boring, actually. Still, it made me think. There was yet more work to be done: more samples and objects to add to my library, to begin with; improvements to be made in the speed and memory of the equipment; and the final design of the finished *PACC* unit had still to be decided upon. And also I had to consider just how exactly I would let my creation loose on our fair societies. It seems a small point, but its importance is not to be underestimated. I wondered, for example, if I wanted to be acknowledged as the creator of this device or whether it would be

better to let it seep its way mysteriously and anonymously into the populace, and the thought did occur to me that if I chose the latter it might be proposed amongst said population that the machine was a piece of extra-terrestrial technology with a sinister secret. I did want people to realise, if nothing else, that this was the triumph of a man, not a Martian. I especially didn't want them to be frightened of using it and to spark off some sort of paranoid luddism. And yet, on the other hand, publicising the device as my work before its release would alert all the governments to my true intentions and give them time in which to act. I decided eventually upon a compromise, whereby the machines would be distributed in a pyramid structure - as opposed to a mass distribution. I socialised for a bit, making as many contacts as possible, with a view to passing on two copies of the finished PACC unit to each of them. They would use one to duplicate the other as many times as necessary and then pass on two to each of *their* contacts, and so on.

"Of course I could not rely absolutely on this plan and, naturally, I had to take measures against its failure. Since I had decided that I would be identified as the creator of the PACC unit this principally involved protecting myself. I thus spent time constructing four secret locations, to any of which I could transport in an emergency, each equipped with complete copies of my equipment."

"And so," said Weinstein, "the final version of the duplicator device has now been completed and my contacts are ready and awaiting its delivery. My research now is but a decorative trifle - I am merely enjoying the tantalising luxury of choosing not to exercise my power for just a few more days. Oh, the joy of anticipation. But farewell to all, soon. The end of the status quo is nigh."

Byrne said, smugly, "So this device of yours... It must swallow up the old juice a bit, surely? Where I come from electricity costs money and plenty of it."

"It is not specialist knowledge, Mr. Byrne, that matter and energy are interchangeable." The scientist's tone held an edge of irritation now. "It is, in fact, an essential axiom of my device. In simple terms, then, it treats matter and energy as two sides of the same coin, and all that is required to 'fuel' a matter-energy transaction is a small amount

of matter: dirt, rock, even air. It is, I assure you, completely cost free."

"Oh yes, of course. That'd be $E=mc^2$, wouldn't it? Slipped out of my mind completely. These arms you stole then - France, Italy, Germany and England - was that another Harry Black venture?" *Have the FSK been feeling the old pinch recently?* Byrne wanted to add.

"Oh that was just a ruse to attract you. In fact I didn't actually steal anything at all. All the crates were planted. In each there was one weapon that was actually an encoder-transmitter device, pre-programmed with the dimensions of the crate. The GPS chip was an extra clue - I had no actual need for such a thing at all, it just served to attract attention. Of course I stole from France, Germany and Italy because they all border with Switzerland, thus suggesting it as the base of the thief, and stealing from England a few months later was intended to imply that I had enhanced the transmitting range of my equipment. I could have done it the other way around if I'd wanted to, but it seemed sensible to present as logical a sequence of events as possible. My auction purchasing was still further assistance - such regular and such prolific behaviour could hardly go unnoticed, I reasoned. And only a man with more money than he knew how to spend would make such an arbitrary choice of theme for his collection. My work at Oxford was, no doubt, covered up, but I knew the information would be made available to MI6. And I knew that all the pieces would be slotted methodically together and that I would be duly discovered at the centre of the puzzle."

Yes. There it was. A light sprinkling of lie, but essentially the truth, no doubt. How obvious it all seemed now. And the arrogant bastard had the cheek to spell it out to him. Extra irony, presumably. Added effect. Byrne could almost hear the roars of laughter on the other end of the microphone. And soon the crunch would come, and how would it be? Would Byrne be allowed to 'escape' with his precious information or were they planning a more dramatic ending to this tale of bungled intelligence and to him?

"You wanted to bring me here?" said Byrne, in entirely unsurprised tones, "Why was that then?"

"Because you impressed me," said Weinstein. "You could have ended it all, a few years ago, had I not been rather lucky. As a consequence I've taken an interest in your affairs and, a while ago, I decided that you were the ideal candidate to help me in a little extra research. There are yet areas of my technology that I would prefer to explore before unleashing it."

"You want me to help you in your research?"

"You are already are, as a matter of fact. Sort of. But I can tell you no more about that at the moment, I'm afraid. One must be terribly careful about intervening variables in one's work. You will find out eventually, I've no doubt."

Find out how pathetically naive we've been, you mean, Byrne wanted to sneer, but instead he smiled and said, "Well that's all very intriguing, of course. But tell me, when do I get to see this fantastic device of yours? Or are you going to fob me off with yet more talk? You see, Mr Weinstein, as curious as your fantasies are, they're not at all the reason that I'm here. I'm here because we suspected you to be Harry Black all along. Your clever disguise wasn't so clever that our computers couldn't crack it. When your man Ivanescu mentioned that you lived in Switzerland we immediately started looking for rich Americans over here - and there you were, buying up impressionist paintings. I think your plan has rather backfired on you. We weren't fooled for a minute by any of this 'teleportation' business - in fact we found it quite amusing that you thought we might be. Is imagination in Moscow really at such an all time low? I find it rather sad - there was a time when I had a healthy respect for my KGB counterparts, but it seems their days of being worthy adversaries are over and gone."

Weinstein was staring at Byrne in fascination. "Ah yes!" he exclaimed suddenly, "I see! You think this is some sort of Russian plot to soil the service's good name; some sort of scandal in the making. How extraordinarily narrow minded of you and how delicious an irony. Here I've been, explaining to you - piece by piece - the workings of human ignorance and all along you've been concocting this little theory of yours and twisting all the convenient facts to fit it: exactly the process I've described to you! I rather think you've quite nicely demonstrated my very point precisely. Soon you

will see for yourself the existence and scope of my technology and the stupidity of your thought will be inescapable. Well well. You have quite surprised me."

"What's this all about, Weinstein?" Byrne said, surprised by the urgency in his own voice.

"Well, Mr Byrne, you are about to be tested. You are about to be tested as you've never been tested before. No MI6 training course; no routine examination; no previous cases, I'll wager, will compare even slightly to the tests you are about to undergo. You will face despair. You will face hopelessness. You will face unimaginable pain and exhaustion. You will face your own mortality. Whether or not you survive the next few days will be entirely dependent on you. Personally, it would please me if you did, but be assured this will not make the slightest bit of difference to your programme whatsoever. There are no safety nets in this course and no-one to come to your aid. If you can't manage it you will die.

"The time for talk is over now. Your precious moment of action has come. I can think of nothing more to add so I will say goodbye, Mr Byrne. Good luck. I hope we will meet again."

Somehow Byrne knew that what was about to follow would be dreadful. It had to be avoided. This had to end now. His right hand slipped into the much practised manoeuvre easily, but, before he had pulled the gun out, Weinstein had simply dissolved away in front of him.

And all was silent in the library.

CHAPTER NINE

POINT AND CLICK CREATION

IT WAS all so damnably familiar. Why? What was it about those last few words of Weinstein's that had sent a chill through Byrne; a sudden terror; a complete and utter feeling of helplessness? Plenty of evil geniuses had bid him farewell before and a tightened stomach and quickened pulse were only natural responses to such words; but this had been more a feeling of panic than a normal and healthy reaction to imminent danger. For several seconds Byrne sat still, staring at the vacant seat beside him and watching the upholstery rise to fill its empty depression. Then he poured himself a cup of tepid coffee and lit a cigarette. *Relax*, he commanded himself, *think*. But the end of the paper tube wobbled violently with the tremble of his hand; the smoke jumped out erratically.

So, it was true then. It had to be. Weinstein had sat here with him; had drunk coffee from the same pot as him; had smoked cigarettes from the same carton as him - *and Byrne had smelled the smoke*. Now he was gone. This was no trick of mirrors or hidden projectors: Weinstein's physical presence in that room was undeniable. *And yet*, thought Byrne, *perhaps that's exactly what he wants me to think*. Weinstein had been here, yes, but had he really vanished as Byrne had so perceived? A fast-acting sedative, perhaps: could Byrne have been gassed and left alone in the library whilst Weinstein had made good his escape? Such a drug, be it one that wore off as quickly as it acted, might just facilitate the illusion - the impression - that Weinstein had simply vanished. He glanced at his watch: no disparity there, but then his watch could have been adjusted whilst he was out.

He jumped out of his chair and across the room, and threw open the library door, ready with his gun for anything that moved outside. And

his stomach sank as he looked into a long corridor that stretched far, far into the distance - across the space that the hallway should have presented and beyond.

Byrne cursed and went back to the table. Then he smiled. This couldn't be the same room he'd occupied with Weinstein: that would place this mysterious new corridor projecting a good hundred yards out of the mountainside. At least. This was a different library, identical in every respect to the original and, presumably, buried somewhere within the mountain - which they knew Weinstein had drilled into anyway. So Byrne had been gassed, moved to this secret location and left to awaken. Clever. But really rather obvious. So then, speed would have been essential: this duplicate library had to be as close to the original library as possible. Could it have been accessed from the latter via a swinging bookcase or something along these fanciful lines that eccentric geniuses seemed so immensely fond of? Byrne went over to the far side bookcase and started pulling the books off the shelves. A lever of some sort or a weighted trigger. It had to be there somewhere.

No lever. No weighted trigger. Five minutes later Byrne stepped over the pile of books and sat down to think.

He glanced at the computer. Fishes swam lazily across the monitor in their pretentious attempt to save screen phosphor. He shelled the machine to DOS and pushed a disk from his pocket into the A drive. Probably it wouldn't work, but it had to be worth a try. The disk contained a special executable file: not a virus as such, but a program that *created* a virus - two viruses, in fact - and injected them directly onto the hard disk; thus the usual disk scanners would be fooled into thinking the disk was clean. Sure enough, with the disk in the drive, "VIRUS INTERCEPTOR" sprang heroically onto the screen and politely asked that Byrne waited a little... then pronounced the disk healthy. He ran the program and the two viruses, 'Mr Nice' and 'Mr Nasty', were duly constructed in the computer's memory; a quick flicker of the hard disk light was all that he saw of their departure. From this point on, Mr Nasty would do as much damage as possible, infecting and corrupting program and data files alike. Mr Nice, however, a stealth virus of exquisite complexity, would take an

altogether much more discreet approach, squeezing itself into virtual nooks and crannies within files that Mr Nasty would conveniently overlook. Once the latter's barbarism had been detected and dealt with, Mr Nice would gather all his bits together and start upon his travels, leaving as many time bombs in his path as possible: time bombs programmed to explode exactly twelve hours after the disk's initial introduction, wiping clean the hard disk of any subsequently infected computer. It *could* be detected by someone who was actively seeking it, but then they would discover Mr Nasty first.

Done. He put the disk back in his pocket and took a last drag on the cigarette. And so to the corridor, presumably. For now, he would play along.

The corridor was carpeted in pale pink and the walls painted cream. Here and there were hung a few prints of paintings which blended... tastefully, he supposed, with the general decor. But, about twenty yards along, the corridor started to change. And in the space of a further five yards or so the carpet had been replaced by old and warped floorboards that squeaked as he trod on them, and the painted walls had become wallpapered walls: a dark green paper that was torn and peeling, and, in places, missing in large chunks. The prints were replaced by dusty portraits in chunky gilt frames (and each portrait a photograph - of Weinstein - painted in rich, furrowed oils: Weinstein the Elizabethan; Weinstein the Victorian; Weinstein the Wing Commander, with a thick, stout moustache and a stiff upper lip; and all with staring eyes that watched Byrne from every angle) and the bright lighting replaced by a dim moonlight, the source of which Byrne could not trace. But none of these changes were immediate. There was no one place where the carpet just stopped, to be replaced by floorboards - the former had somehow been blended into the latter so that, halfway along this five yard stretch, the floor appeared to be both carpet and floorboards at the same time - carpeted in narrow, grey strips, to be precise. The walls had turned from painted to papered in a similar fashion: gradually the colour had turned from cream to a pastel green, to an olive green and, finally, to dark green. By the pastel green stage the paint had a papery look to it. Somehow. Byrne walked up and down this short stretch a few times, fascinated by the

effect. Then he walked on.

The air grew colder as he walked. It grew darker. Byrne began to feel distinctly uneasy. A small light had appeared a long way in front of him: an opening, perhaps, about two hundred yards away. He found himself walking faster. Then he began to trot. And then he heard a high pitched whine from somewhere outside him and a grinding noise from all around. Hydraulics, unmistakably. And the latter was the scrape of brick on wood. The walls were vibrating. The walls were moving towards him.

He cursed and started to run. He started to sprint. And suddenly the moonlight was gone and there was just darkness and noise and the tiny pocket of light. At that point the *déjà vu* that he'd felt in C's office returned, overwhelmingly, and Byrne almost stumbled with the shock. No time for this now: he had to focus, he had to focus on speed and the light. Ignore the walls. Ignore the feeling. But the *déjà vu* persisted, remained, nagged and nagged his consciousness to take note: there was something else he should know, there was something else he *had* to be aware of. Something about this test. Something about the light. Something dreadful. Something terrible.

He felt his arms brushing against the paintings as he pounded the floorboards, and then one clattered to the floor behind him. Nearly there, though. Nearly there. And then it was just a few yards away and he could see it clearly: a sheet of thin paper stretched across a blessed exit. He reached forward and clenched his hand into a fist. The paper gave way and he burst through. The dazzling light blinded him and he shut his eyes. And suddenly it came to him: the light; the drop. *The drop*. He flung out his arms and grabbed at the flapping remains of the paper as he flew by. He twisted himself around. The paper came away in his grasp and he flailed desperately. He grabbed at air, air, air... And, at last, his hand hit something solid; he clung to it desperately and let his body swing against something hard with a thud.

For a minute he just hung there, gasping. Then he opened his eyes and looked around him.

He was in a large cylindrical room, brightly light by fluorescent tubes. The walls were a white, slippery plastic. To a level that was

about two feet below his shoes the room had been filled with water. Hot water. Byrne could feel the steam condensing on his forehead and dampness seeping through his shirt. But he didn't need to see or feel the water to know it was there, it was almost as if he could remember plunging into this pool and the accompanying pain that was like the stab of a dagger instantaneously at every point on his body. The water was clear. He could see a large stopcock about a metre below the surface. This had to be opened, Byrne recalled, to let more water into the room. He would have had to dive to it, then to wait for the level of the water to rise high enough that the doorway from which he now hung became accessible. A test of tolerance and control, then. With every thrashing of limb the crisp, scalding pain would have been renewed. How efficient could one be in such a situation? Would not the agony drive a man to madness or unconsciousness long before death occurred from the slow boiling of his innards?

It was no effort to pull himself up to the ledge above him, but Byrne did so carefully, in case there was yet a last precaution taken by Weinstein to ensure his fall into the water. The, test, after all, seemed quite definite in its design; avoiding it altogether, as he had somehow managed, did not seem likely to be part of its construction. And this was the very doorway he had almost thrown himself through, but the paper that should have been in shreds around the edges was gone: now there was just a white door. He pulled it open and wandered into the darkness beyond.

The light behind him illuminated only a small stretch of rock in front, and a glint of metal. Then the white door shut and when Byrne felt for it his fingers touched only stone. For a few minutes he stood in the darkness and waited.

Two brilliant lights came on: one about five yards to his left, the other the same distance to his right. Then another two. Then another two. And so on, endlessly. Gradually, the two lines of lights illuminated a cavern. How high or how low it was Byrne could not tell. In fact his judgement had to be based purely on the absence of anything. All he could see was that the platform on which he stood lasted for just a few feet and was then bitten off by blackness that

could have been a drop of two inches or two miles. One other detail presented itself: a long, polished metal pole, about two inches in diameter. Under the glare of the lights it was a strip of glowing white that split the surrounding darkness in two. From the end of the platform it leapt across the cavern, eventually merging with the spotlights. How far could it be? A hundred yards? Two hundred? A thousand?

Freddie Uncle Charlie Katie, thought Byrne. How in Christ's name was he expected to cross that?

And this should have been the corridor. This should have been the corridor with the moving walls and the egotistical portraits. How was it possible that he could be here and not there? Byrne thought back to his blind dance in the air and wondered how much could have happened in those tiny, oblivious seconds. The white room had been cylindrical, hadn't it? With one opening only - of that he was certain. But supposing the room had rotated whilst he'd been fighting for a grip - ever so slightly; through just a few degrees - so that the closing corridor had slid smoothly and silently from sight to be replaced by the white door and this. The light had been intended to blind temporarily: white walls, plastic walls, shiny walls - and then the water - and all this after the blackness of the desperate run. Of course his eyes had been shut. He hadn't seen a thing. All to create the illusion that the corridor had somehow disappeared from existence and that this had materialised in its place. A clever use of disorientation, thought Byrne, nothing more. He pushed the issue aside.

Byrne undid his belt and got down on his knees at the edge of the platform. He leaned forward, resting his trunk on the pole, and refastened the belt around it. Shuddering slightly at the look of the darkness below he slid himself fully onto the pole then eased himself down, so that he was hanging by his hands and feet.

He moved off. It was easy to begin with: hand over hand over hand. Byrne reckoned he had two to three hundred yards of this, using his estimated length of the corridor as an approximation, which would be a gruelling task, but by no means an unattainable one. And the belt would help. But how would the Byrne that had endured the

water test have coped? For him, such a distance would have seemed endless, excruciating, unbearable. The length was right for the planned parameters, but Byrne had escaped these variables and that could only mean that Weinstein would be wringing his hands in frustration right now. A slight smile crept onto his face as he visualised the image. Yes. He could allow himself to feel a little smug now. He had earned it. The water test was crucial to the outcomes of all the tests that followed and, without it, all great efforts were just routine. The anticipated Byrne would be feeling death on his shoulder at this moment, his very physical state nagging at him that there was no nice status quo awaiting him this time. What was left of his skin would be scorched red and bubbled with blisters, and the first few grasps of the pole would have torn it away, leaving the raw flesh of his hands and a trail of slippery blood along the pole. All the dignity of the genial, debonair spy would be gone: he would be an animal, he would be a thing; Weinstein and the case and the realm would be meaningless and gone, and only survival and pathetic remorse would accompany him through this last tour of indescribable agony. And Byrne could almost feel the regrets of this pitiful creature as he himself moved solidly along the pole: of warmth and softness unappreciated, of love rejected, of childhood innocence broken and un-repairable. It was an odd feeling and Byrne felt slightly guilty about it, as though it was somehow quite inappropriate and unfair that he should have survived this test whilst the hypothetical alternative had not. But these were not his circumstances, he told himself, he had escaped the horror. Again. As always he somehow managed - through skill, through stamina, through sheer grit and determination, and yes, sometimes, through complete and utter luck. Had he not learnt by now to shut these horrors away in their box, to forget about them, to clear his mind of what could have been and to concentrate on what was? Was that not the only thing that had kept him alive and sane through all these years? Forget! Focus! Yet the feeling was so vivid it was as though it really was his own. *The end*, thought Byrne, *it would finally be the end*. And if ever he could have returned to the normal world it would only be as an invalid, only to gaze across manicured lawns and decorative flower beds from his wheelchair,

only to be tended by nurses trained not to gasp at the sight of him. Remembered. Celebrated. Dead in a chair with wheels on.

Byrne fought for control. The view from his window at the Pullman-Continental swam hazily into view, but it was blurred and undefined; it was sterile and dull. This was just another glimpse of the wretched life that had brought him here. He needed more. He needed real colours and smells, *real experiences*; not just an arbitrary distraction picked up like a book on a train. He delved into long lost memories, through teenage trips abroad and further still, to the summer holidays of his childhood. Tintagel; his great aunt and her grand old house by the cliff tops. And this too was where the other Byrne's thoughts would lie: of lazy, carefree days that were both empty and full at the same time, of fun and adventure, of innocence. But Byrne fought for the smaller details that would evade the tortured memory. The jugs and demi-johns hanging from the kitchen walls. The castellated wall and the lichen in the cracks. Big, heavy bolts of iron, and handles that squeaked and clunked. The red, five-leafed clover growing in clumps by the pond. The honeysuckle. The roses. The musty old lounge with its thick, heavy curtains and the millions of golden 'bits' where the daylight streamed into the room. Byrne found his picture and he clung to it. Slowly, he began to relax. And slowly the panic receded.

That'll teach you to be smug, thought Byrne. For a few moments longer the picture hung serenely before him, enticing him towards a naive personal promise. He contemplated the usefulness of such a self-deception for a while and then dismissed it. No. And anyway, it wouldn't - *couldn't* - be the same. His great aunt was dead and the house had passed into the hands of his obnoxious cousins. Forget. Focus. Move on.

Hand over hand over hand. How far had he to go now? He dropped his head back to look forward. But there was no end to the metal pole: on and on it went, piercing the darkness forever. He stopped and rested, letting his belt take the weight. Then impatience overcame him and he carried on, determined not to look ahead again, at least not for a while. Hand over hand over hand. He looked ahead. Still no end in sight. He rested again.

This was no good. He moved off again, with what he hoped was a firmer resolve. It was just a question of adapting one's modality to the circumstances, he reasoned. Accept the situation. Adjust. He tried to become pleasantly bored.

The ledge he had left behind was now just a small, smooth sheen at the end of the line of light. He could only see it if he lifted his head above the pole, and then only just. It was satisfyingly distant. And then this faraway lustre disappeared completely and Byrne was left alone in his empty world. It was just him and the pole and nothing. And after a while he could no longer be sure of left from right or up from down, even if it was he indeed that was moving along the pole or the pole that was moving and he just struggling to remain in place. Only pain supplied the relevant dimensional information, the pain in his arms that were trembling now, trembling and heavy.

Perhaps he had come a good distance now? Easily as far as when first he had stopped, perhaps even a little further. That deserved a look ahead. He stopped to take a peek; still there was no end in sight.

Onward again. He began to feel his fabricated indifference begin to waver. Then he was angry. That stop - it had broken his mood. Now he would have to go at least as far again before he could begin to believe he'd achieved something. But how much further could he go? Surely those three hundred yards had been covered? And every time a hand left the metal now the accompanying arm would start to shake in reaction to the strain. And he was getting slower.

He stopped again. This time it had not been through choice. His left hand had been shaking so much it had actually missed the pole and his right hand, in automatically relinquishing the strain for its short trip - and apparently oblivious to its companion's failure - had slipped at the shock. For a moment he hung by his belt, gasping and suddenly craving nicotine. He weighed up his immediate predicament, including a quick glance ahead in case an end had miraculously appeared. Sod it. He took out his cigarettes.

Five relatively blissful minutes later he started off again. Hand over hand... over hand. The pole seemed a little warmer than it had been before. The heat of the lights, presumably. But then it got hotter and hotter still, and Byrne felt his stomach churn as the implication

dawned. Another heat test. Here, in this cavern. To compensate for the water test evasion, perhaps, or had Weinstein wished to see, from the onset, what last, final reserves he could squeeze out of a man? Byrne's mind moved up a gear as he raced through the possibilities. God, what had he been thinking about, stopping to take a cigarette - *a bloody cigarette* - those few minutes could have been crucial! Idiot! Byrne forgot about the ache in his arms and forced them into action. Faster. Faster. Hand, hand, pull; hand, hand, pull. Move, you bastard, move!

Quite how Weinstein was managing to heat up this enormous length of metal so quickly was beyond Byrne. But hotter it got. And perhaps two minutes had passed from the moment this next stage had revealed itself, and already the pole was approaching the temperature where Byrne's reflexes would kick in and refuse to let him grasp it. He had to stop. He had to cover his hands. Swearing colourfully he let himself hang by the belt again and took off his jacket. As he ripped out the sleeves he could smell burning leather. He wrapped his hands up in the heavy fabric and grabbed the pole just as the belt snapped. The jerk shook his feet from the pole and sent him into a wide swing. One hand slipped and its bandage unwound slightly before he could grasp the pole again. Good God, already the heat was easing its way through. There was nothing he could do about that. He had to move on.

Byrne, grunting with the effort, pulled his feet back up to the pole and started off again. Hand, hand, pull; hand, hand, pull. Come on! It couldn't be far now. His movement was clumsy with the makeshift pads and they were getting looser and looser with every foot moved. His shoes were burning. His hands were burning. And the air around the pole seemed on fire with the stale, dry heat given off by the hot metal, so that every breath hurt. He was choking. He was failing. Come on, dammit! Move! Forget about the pain. Forget about everything. Just keep going. Keep Moving. You've got to make it! You have to! He screamed, and his spittle hit the pole with a hiss and ricocheted out into the cavern. The cavern screamed back. And still he moved: wild, terrified, animal jerks. They were all he had left.

The heat. *The heat.* God, this was terrible. Byrne, his face

dripping with perspiration, took a last look forward.

His right hand hesitated in the air and its wrapping slipped away without a sound. A moment passed. His palm hovered, ready to grasp, ready to do what was necessary if ordered.

No end in sight. *No*, thought Byrne, *not like this. I choose.*

He let go of the pole. It rocketed up into the black, longer and thinner and longer still, as he plunged into the darkness below.

He hit something that felt like a net. It slowed him down quickly and then it sprang him back up. The net stuck to him all the way to the zenith of his rebound. Byrne quietly oscillated for a few minutes, until finally he came to a rest.

And then the lights came on.

Not a net, then. A web. An enormous web that stretched across the width of the cavern. Byrne was stuck fast to several strands of the sticky spiral and close to its centre, where the mesh was most dense. Further out the threads were spaced wider apart and a falling man could have slipped right through to his dark death below. How convenient a placing. How unlikely a coincidence: a web, created in seconds, exactly for Byrne's salvation; wherever he had fallen it would have been there to catch him. There was no end to the pole above - that was the whole point. The test had been to see how far he could go before giving up; how much he could give before letting go; how much he could take before accepting his death and embracing it. And now - *now* - for the great, grand finale.

He shivered violently at the image which now presented itself. Slowly he was beginning to comprehend the full implications of this concept of Weinstein's, of 'Point And Click Creation', as the scientist had termed it. One had to think beyond the immediately apparent connotations of transportation and duplication; much further. Even the account of Weinstein's house, this being the first exemplification of the true power of the technology Byrne had encountered, had failed to generate an actual understanding. Now he was starting to realise. It was a simple connection that had been formed, and not one which

Weinstein had omitted to mention. In fact, the American had quite categorically pointed out the power that computers could lend to his duplication theory; only Byrne had not really fully comprehended that remark, he had assumed the speed and computational power element of computers - the automation of long or difficult tasks bit - to be the relevance of Weinstein's point. Now a very different application sprang to mind. A distant memory of using a computer art package had climbed into consciousness, and the dimness of the recollection was sufficient that the event had become appropriately distorted with regards to the circumstances that had issued its retrieval. Thus it was not a daisy he could recall enlarging with a point, a drag and a click of a mouse; not a daisy that grew instantaneously to fill the whole screen with its petals. Not a daisy, but a spider.

He felt the web shake slightly, then sag as new weight was added to it. Then, in front of him, a patch of the darkness separated itself from the cavern wall and started moving towards him. One long, thin, hairy leg unfolded cautiously into the light, and then another, and then the tentacle-like pedipalps, wagging slowly up and down, and then the eyes: eight, shiny balls of glazed emptiness that stared through Byrne hungrily. It was enormous. Its fat abdomen alone had to be at least three feet in length.

This was no fantastic spider of infamous repute - not a black widow, not a funnel web, not one of the many furry mygalomorph or huntsman species incorrectly referred to as tarantulas, nor indeed the true tarantula: the *Lycosa* wolf spider. It could not, of course, be any of these since none would spin a web such as this. Though its unnatural size impeded immediate identification, Byrne, who was required to possess a routine general knowledge on such subjects, quickly recognised his new foe as *Araneus diadematus*, the common garden spider. But its ubiquity was of little comfort: all spiders are poisonous, regardless of their commonality. *Araneus diadematus*' bite might not have posed a threat to a human in its normal dimensions, but at this size those fangs and their poison would penetrate and paralyse, just as easily as if he were indeed a fly. Byrne lay absolutely still and forced his breathing to slow and slight. The spider was waiting now for the extra jerks and twists of a panicked prey that

would tell it where to go in its web: when he moved he would have just seconds in which to act. Slowly, very slowly, he lifted his head and examined his spread-eagled position, noting the whereabouts of his hands, arms and legs in relation to the criss-crossed strands. The orbital threads of a spider's web are sticky, but the support threads, the spokes that run from the middle to an anchor point outside and upon which the spider herself treads to avoid becoming trapped in her own web, are dry. And Byrne's right wrist lay across just such a thread. Good. That arm's hand was the only actual flesh contact the limb had with the web; if he could free the hand the jerk might be enough to snap away the cuff button, and then he would have freedom of movement all the way to his gun under his left armpit.

At most there were ten yards between them. It would have to be all at once. Everything. Byrne grimaced at the thought of the task and readied himself. A few deep breaths. Tense those muscles. Wait... Wait...

Now! Pull! *Pull!* Pull with every ounce of power you can find. Pull your hand out of its skin if you have to. *Get that hand free.* And then the creature was upon him, sprinting the distance in a second. Byrne screamed, both in terror and exertion. The strands began to stretch as he pulled and as they stretched they grew weaker. At last they ripped and, at once, his cuff button pinged a hurried arc across the creature's glare. But he had barely enough time to snatch the gun out of its holster, let alone to aim it. *Araneus diadematus* was on top of him, searching for a place in which to sink her fangs and Byrne had to close his eyes at the sight. The creature's foul breath on his face made him want to retch and his instincts were shouting at him to cover his face and to scream and to wail and to scream until the end. But the machine within him was not dead yet. It demanded he fought. It demanded he lived. And Byrne forced his eyes open and thrust the gun up into the chelicera and fired. A thick, yellow ooze splattered his face and the beast let out a sharp, pungent hiss. Byrne shifted his aim and fired into the upper body. *Araneus diadematus'* legs wobbled slightly, seemed to hesitate, then gave way completely. She collapsed on top of Byrne and died.

Byrne heard his ribs crack. Suddenly he could hardly breathe. But

he was alive. Christ, he was alive. With ridiculous calmness, he took aim across the cabin and fired four times; once at all but two of the supporting strands that held the web to the far wall. Surely it was faith alone that carried the bullets to their targets; in quick succession, the desired threads of silk were severed and, with each break, the giant web jerked and twisted; down, down, and then the giant spider slid mercifully from Byrne's broken body to plummet into the darkness below. The sound of the creature's massive weight crushing it into the cavern floor came two seconds later.

He lay for a minute, at this unusual inclination, gasping, and wincing with every gasp. Then he strained to pull his right leg free. When this was done and he had reached his ankle knife, he slowly cut himself free from the web. The spider's life-line, the single strand of thread that all spiders continually pay out behind them as a precaution against emergency, dangled limply from the edge of the web. Byrne grasped it and eased himself gradually down, his arms shaking with exhaustion.

And then new lights came on, around and beneath him. And Byrne saw that there was still a good forty feet to the cavern floor and just two more feet of life-line; it had never been intended for such accelerations. The remains of *Araneus diadematus* were splashed about the rock below. Without giving himself time to think about the idea he let go of the silk and fell towards the soft mess of the carcass. The putrid slop caught him, and he pulled himself out and away, sobbing like a child. Then he leaned over and vomited, violently, retching and retching until there was nothing left to bring up.

His last reserves of dignity made him strip off his stinking clothes down to his underpants. He wiped the slime off his face and out of his hair, and then, mostly free of the rotten stench, he dragged himself over to a small, wooden door in the cavern wall.

The door led to a small room, furnished with a bed and table. On the table was a flask of water and a pot of coffee, aside milk, cream, sugar and a Limoges cup and saucer. Byrne tipped the water over his face and hands, washing away the last of the spider. He sipped a little coffee for a few minutes and smoked a cigarette.

Whether or not you survive the next few days... Weinstein's words

pushed their way into Byrne's thoughts and sat there solidly. *Days*. Was it even an hour yet since he'd left the library? Had he even completed a tenth, a twentieth, of the 'tests' he had to undergo?

Certainly it felt like more than an hour, but then a lot had happened in that time, least of all his own pains and exertions. Byrne had left the library with an ignorant complacency that seemed almost cheerful compared to the hopeless mixture of awe and confusion he felt now. The spider, for him, had represented no less than a total collapse of his entire belief structure; at the time it had been an issue best left for later contemplation, but nothing could distract him from it now.

Teleportation. Duplication. Weinstein had been telling the truth all along. Byrne wasn't sure what it all meant yet, but he knew that he was shaking.

CHAPTER TEN

DON'T CALL ME DARLING

BYRNE AWOKE, some four hours later, from a deep and undisturbed sleep. Perhaps something in his mind, some sort of unconscious mental mediator between stress and requirement, had finally drawn the line and closed down the dream centre in view of recent and anticipated demand; perhaps Byrne had been too exhausted to dream. Nonetheless, it took just three seconds for the happy innocence of a comfortable awakening to drop away and for the heavy weight of his predicament to sink upon his thoughts and soul. He sighed.

Weinstein had not been inactive throughout Byrne's absence from the conscious world. A new set of clothes hung neatly from the door, pressed and ironed in readiness for the evening's action, and a cold salad waited on the table with orange juice and water - a light meal, Byrne noted, which, he decided, did not bode well. He got up, stretched, decided that he felt distinctly odd in some way, and went over to examine the clothes. They were identical in every respect to those he had selected for breakfast that morning; so identical, in fact, that Byrne would have sworn them *to be* these very clothes if he hadn't actually witnessed their demise himself. Another oddity. And it was then that he realised the nature of his own feeling of strangeness, which was that he felt fine - absolutely fine; his arms didn't ache, his hands weren't burnt; there wasn't a scratch on his body. He even had an appetite. So Byrne sat down at the table and put the salad away, determined not to be distracted by things (and good things, at that) for which he had no explanation. And when it was finished the empty plate and its knife and fork simply dissolved into nothingness to be replaced, two seconds later, by a pot of coffee and a packet of cigarettes. Byrne stared at these new items for a

couple of minutes, swearing to himself that he would never get used to a sight such as that. Then he sighed, took a cigarette and smoked for a while, keeping his mind as blank as possible for just those few extra minutes.

Byrne dressed and left, unsurprised that the clothes were a perfect fit, unsurprised that then cavern wherefrom he had entered this little room no longer lay beyond the door. Instead he entered a cobbled alleyway, walled on each side in worn, red brick and illuminated by a gas-lit street lamp of wrought iron that stood at the intersection of this and another alleyway about twenty paces away. Byrne walked to this junction and looked around the corner. And it really was just another alleyway. To the left it seemed to travel a good fifty yards before turning right, and Byrne could spot at least five turnings off in this direction, each with their own street lamps; to the right it stretched just five or six yards before turning left. He took the right hand turn, followed the alley round to the left and stopped. More of the same, mostly. This time the alley travelled thirty yards or so before veering right, and there were three of the street-lamped turnings.

Of course. A maze. A labyrinth. Despite himself, Byrne felt a huge wave of relief at the lack of immediate danger. A maze he could deal with. Hopefully. He turned back and returned to the alley which led to the room... Which *had* led to the room, for where the door had been there was now just another brick wall, a dead end, and screwed into this wall at head height was a sign - a street sign - that said, in large black capitals, "START".

So Byrne started, turning left and left and left and left, for only by keeping strictly to such a methodical search pattern could he avoid getting himself hopelessly, hopelessly lost. If the finish was on the perimeter, and there was no better place to assume it to be for now, he would find it using this pattern. If it wasn't, he'd just end up making a very large circle and back here at the start - *then* he would consider alternative methods. Left, left, left. When an alleyway came to a dead end he pivoted around 180 degrees and, in so doing, turned all previously right-hand turns into left-hand turns. Left, left and left again. Keep to it. Don't get distracted.

Presently he began to think. Richard Byrne was not a man

particularly given to the art of contemplation. He had often, on occasion, asked himself *where* he was going, but rarely *why*. As a general rule he tried to avoid such thoughts, finding them faintly depressing on the whole, but for reasons unknown. Whenever the question actually arose his immediate and rather aggressive reply would always be something along the lines of "for my country", but in truth this was more of a reflex response, designed to close the subject down before a more detailed investigation could be embarked upon, rather than a genuine, heartfelt reply. But then one would suppose such a reason to be entirely adequate a justification. Who would undermine the concept of national security with a riposte such as, "What's so good about your country, then?" or, "Why don't you do something for yourself?" The greatness of the realm is taken for granted entirely, even by the cynics amongst us, in the context of enemy action. Yes, Byrne's secret dread of such questioning was more a case of well-repressed doubt than a simple and sensible unwillingness to discuss his profession. He never tried to answer these nagging questions when they came to him in the private confines of his own company. He had a right not to, he reasoned, and how dare anyone expect otherwise; yet he could equally have argued that it would indeed be prudent to have a well-crafted reply ready for such damnable insolence, if ever it happened to arise. And in Weinstein's company he had found himself lacking those very answers, and searching for them. The question itself had remained unspoken, yet it had hung in the air between them, begging to be uttered, and rarely more than a sentence away. Only Byrne's cover and their shared pretence had averted its use. But Byrne had felt its presence, regardless, and he had felt it do its work. It was the doubt, the doubt that all of this was for a just cause that gnawed at him. His job. His life. But more than that - the very objective, the very direction of society. Was it just the preservation of the status quo? Was it just greed? Was it just power? Surely only a handful of people could fail to acknowledge the ultimate drive to be *something* along the lines of improving things for the greater good? Poverty, famine, disease, war; were these not generally accepted as being unavoidable, inevitable priorities? Or were they considered only side issues, to be

glanced at only after the status quo issues? Or would one simply tend not to think about such things?

A difficult subject to contain. Thinking like this irritated Byrne immensely. He wanted things to fall together into some sort of irrefutable whole; to be able, definitively, to reach a coherent conclusion that he could believe in and defend. But bits and pieces had to keep on worming their way in, from all directions, taking him off on branch after branch. Was this open-mindedness or indecisiveness? What businessman worth his salt, for example, would openly proclaim his disinterest in matters of worldly concern? So how could one pass any such judgement on him? Did one look to his expensive car, his luxurious house or his extravagant lifestyle as evidence of such an attitude? And if so was this not just another example of Weinstein's deriving the why from the what, no better than passing off the unemployed as scrounging leeches on the honest tax payer, no better than passing off the vociferous as rude, the quiet as antisocial, the different as degenerate? Maybe he *was* concerned. Maybe his 5p donation to some charity or other for every something or other sold was an act of genuine magnanimity and not merely the shameless cashing in on a useful zeitgeist that it would inevitably be portrayed as such by the cynics, the pessimists and the entertainers. Would they feel any different if it was 10p or 15p? Would they rather he just handed over his entire profits? How could one *know*? How could one be absolutely sure that progress was not, somewhere, being made? How could one so confidently write off society as a lost cause?

In essence, then, what approach should one take to society? In what esteem should people be generally held? Should one automatically assume that each and every person has a secret Mr Hyde at the ultimate controls? Should one take it for granted that a person's overt behaviour is at least partly constructed to hide the real person below? Would it be naive to take the opinion that people are essentially good, with the exception of a rotten, but inevitable few? Were the countless exposés of consumer scandals and sleazy politition dealings the extent of the lies or just the beginning? How often was one lied to in a day? In an hour? In a minute? How many of the liars

actually realised they were lying? How many cared?

This was one hell of a maze. Its windings went in every direction. How was one to decide? How, more to the point, had Weinstein decided? The confidence in the scientist's opinions had shaken Byrne. He spoke as if he had not the slightest, tiniest bit of doubt in his beliefs, and Byrne could ordinarily have felt content to disagree with him, to patronise him with a private diagnosis of immature naivety and the over-exaggeration and melodrama more typical of a teenager than a grown man; except that Weinstein had had that option covered: he had spoken of the lengths people go to to avoid questioning themselves, and that, of course, was exactly what Byrne was doing. Indeed, he realised, it was not at all that he actually disagreed with Weinstein, but simply that he *wanted* to disagree. And yet, despite the power of the argument, he still felt that it was insufficient, that if he were to repeat it verbatim to another person it would be somehow unconvincing. So what would they say? How would they knock him back? Would it be a riposte worthy of the debate: a real, unquestionable observation or beautiful point of logic that he'd forgotten or overlooked? Or would it be stubborn defiance: a quick, flippant, narrow-minded remark that, yes, *logic* could defeat, if only logic were respected. Was that the cause of his doubt; simply that people would not care to hear such criticisms. Did he just expect to be denied in the same manner that he had hoped to deny Weinstein?

What was the point of all this mental debate? What relevance did it have to the case? The point was this: assuming that Byrne really was genuinely motivated by the well-being of his country, he could only justify action to destroy Weinstein's plans if he sincerely believed them to be a threat. And if he believed this then essentially he had to be in agreement with the scientist over the general state of society. Byrne could not deny that a part of him was truly excited by this invention. He could see its virtues quite clearly. A society that used such a device sensibly would be an absolute utopia: there would be no famine, no poverty, no homelessness; there would be no despair. And it was here. Now. If he could only convince himself that Weinstein was wrong, that the planet would blossom with the technology, rather than poison itself with it, then he would just stand back and let the

scientist get on with it. Who was he to stand in the way of such a wonderful opportunity?

But if Weinstein was right...

Byrne stopped abruptly, his chain of thought suddenly invaded by a distant noise. Rushing. Like trees in the wind. Like waves breaking on a pebbled shore... What *was* that? And then, almost as soon as he had asked himself the question, he knew. And he started to run, hope bubbling up inside him and shattering the misery of his situation and of unresolved thoughts. Byrne broke his pattern. He turned right, then left, then right and right again, straining to listen, straining to locate what he knew, beyond shadow of a doubt, had to be an underground waterfall. And even the suicidal insanity of what he knew he would have to do wasn't enough to keep a wide grin from breaking out across his face; a hope - any hope - was joyful compared to this. Now the rushing was a roar, and the air was wet with the fine mist of pulverised water. Byrne rounded another two corners and had to grab the last of these to stop himself from falling into it.

It was magnificent. A thick, white, thundering column of water that plunged through the air to a gaping hole in the floor of the maze. Not quite as powerful as the Trimlebach falls Byrne had visited on his trip to Interlaken six months ago, but, by God, ten times as welcome a sight. Here, quite triumphantly, was a limitation of Weinstein's technology. And here was a chance. The maze had been unable to form around the waterfall and the walls which should have dissected it were broken off around its volume, as if a large set of teeth had just bitten them away. The scientist had tried to take nature at its mightiest on, and he had lost.

Tentatively, Byrne peered into the hole in the ground, that was perhaps two feet wider in diameter than the column of water. And bitterness overwhelmed him as he saw the sheer impossibility of the task he had set himself. What he could see of the inside of the shaft was so wet and slippery he doubted it would lend any purchase whatsoever for his hands and feet. And that was what he could see, which was a distance of five or six feet at most. Nothing to see and nothing to hold on to, and a ton of water a second trying to tear him away and smash him into pieces. *Forget all that*, Byrne told himself,

You will do it. You'll do it because you've no other choice. And you'll do it now, because Weinstein could pluck you out of here at any moment. Stop whining, stop complaining; just get down and get on with it.

If only he had his belt. Thirty yards of high tensile wire would have come in handy right now. He sat down on the edge, his legs hanging over the side, and, on a sudden, fanciful impulse, he looked down at the belt he was wearing - the belt Weinstein had provided along with all his other clothes. And there they were: three tiny scratches in the buckle, in exactly the right places and proportions. It had to be a coincidence. But Byrne whipped the belt off anyway, his hands trembling with hope. And the false stud was there, and pulled away, and with it came the wire. *It was his belt.* And, of course, it was obvious how, wasn't it? Weinstein had duplicated it along with the rest of his clothes. *That was why they were identical.* Byrne smacked himself in the head for his stupidity. He got back to his feet, painfully aware that every extra second he delayed his escape was an extra second for Weinstein to see what was going on and to teleport him out of there. He looked for somewhere to secure the wire, found a lamppost and looped the wire around it, tying it off in a round turn and two half hitches. Time to ruin his jacket again; this time he tore out the pockets and gloved his hands in them. He pulled out the whole length of the wire and threw away the belt.

Good. All this in under a minute. Byrne wasted no more time. He threw the wire into the shaft, grabbed hold of it firmly and eased himself over the edge.

He was soaked to the skin by the freezing water in less than five feet of his descent and the makeshift gloves were practically useless as protection from the wire, which dug into his hands and fingers agonisingly as he slowly let it slide through his grasp. But all of this - even the endless buffeting from the fall - was tiny compared to the elation he felt. Cuts and bruises. Nothing. Absolutely nothing at all. The light faded quickly. Byrne descended about three yards further and then his feet found a ledge - a tiny, insubstantial ledge, perhaps just two inches deep, but enough to lend his feet sufficient purchase to free one hand temporarily. He dug into his trouser pocket and brought

out his lighter. The drizzle put the flame out almost immediately, but the brief flare of light was enough to show him the shaft continuing straight down for the range of the flame's illumination. Onward, then. And Byrne had no idea where this could take him; whether he could possibly survive this route, let alone escape through it. Thirty yards, he had: a fraction of the mountain's height. Yet it seemed of little consequence to him. He was indifferent, as all good agents at their finest should be. Thirty yards; and then he would just have to see.

Then things got considerably worse. Byrne had come about ten yards when his feet made a sudden, unexpected contact with the water, and the force threw them into the rock. His shins hit an outcrop violently and, with the shock of the pain, his grip on the wire loosened momentarily. He dropped about two feet at once. And then the water hit again, intentionally, it seemed, but harder this time; much harder, throwing his legs into a space that shouldn't have been there: inwards, forwards, past where the shaft wall should have been. This time his stomach received the blow, and from the same outcrop; this time his hands lost the wire completely and it was all he could do to grasp the ledge of rock as he sailed by. In a split second, Byrne realised what had happened. Here, beneath him, the shaft had suddenly altered its course, turning sharply in Byrne's direction so that the torrent of water was now rushing horizontally below him towards its next point of descent. The rock he now clung to was the last of the shaft; but it was more than just a matter of hanging there that Byrne had to manage - perhaps there was just a foot of space between his body and the water, and maintaining this was a feat not dissimilar to hanging from a doorframe and keeping one's feet touching the next room's ceiling. His arms shook; his stomach muscles screamed at him. And Byrne knew that he could only keep this position for a few seconds more.

At last his desperate feet found a vertical ledge they could press into, and his left hand was freed to hunt, blindly, for the wire. He found it, grasped it and transferred his weight over from the outcrop. He lowered himself slowly, still keeping his feet firmly pressed into their hold, until he judged his head to be below the outcrop. A little further still, into a crouched position, pulling on the wire with all the

strength he could find. And now his legs were trembling with the effort. He released one, doubling the strain on the other in so doing, and searched for something - anything - to accommodate it. It was a stretch, but he found a crack, just big enough, and he dug his toe cap in and pulled on it. A little further down the wire. Then both feet were in the crack. Keep going. Keep going. He repeated this process twice, creeping across the ceiling like a spider, and the further he got the harder he had to pull on the wire to prevent himself from falling. Then his feet found a wall, a new wall; the shaft had turned downwards again.

Muscles on the point of collapse, legs exhausted, everything about to give way and fold in completely; there was only one thing for it now - to wrap as much of the wire around his hands as possible and to drop, through the fall, and to hang on with all his might. Don't think. Just do. Byrne dared a few extra inches, pulled up some of the wire and wound his right hand around it four times. He dropped. The wire swung through to the new lip below where the water toppled into its next descent; the remainder - a length of about two feet - twisted down into the vertical shaft and Byrne was hurled through the fall, through the tiny space on the other side and slammed into the rock face. But the extra windings held, digging painlessly into his numbed flesh as they tightened.

He hung for a moment, by the single hand, fighting off unconsciousness and not altogether sure whether or not he had succeeded for a while; then he pulled his free arm up to share the wire and found purchase for his feet in the rock. He freed his right hand so that blood might return to its fingers. Arms ok. Legs ok. Nothing broken, it seemed. Well that was something at least, although how the fall had failed to dislocate his shoulder was quite beyond him. He took his lighter out, and it slipped straight through his fumbling fingers and down into the shaft. Hopeless. An omen. *One which you will ignore*, Byrne told himself, *now get going. Now.*

Using his feet as much as he could, Byrne inched his way down the shaft. A foot. Then a yard. Then five yards. Then ten. Not much further to go until the end of the wire now. Another foot. Another. And suddenly Byrne noticed something in front of him: a lustre, a

sheen, a reflection; dull and very barely visible, but there; light on wet rock; light; *light!* He looked down, and immediately he could see it: an opening, some ten yards below; a cavern of some sort; light that sparkled on a surface of water like dancing fairies. He was almost there. *He was almost there.* In an instant, he found strength and energy again. Trembling with anticipation, Byrne eased his grip on the wire and let himself slide down slowly.

And then he was at the end of the wire, with a good seven yards or so remaining between him and the opening, and still ten more yards after that to the pool below. Byrne debated jumping from there and dismissed the idea almost immediately; he would try to climb down as far as he could. It was a naive decision. He managed perhaps two feet on his own - a distance he could have achieved just by hanging full length from the end of the wire, and then his fall would have been straight. Two feet. Then his right foot slipped. His fingers slid uselessly from their tiny hold and he fell, skittering down the side of the shaft until a ledge turned his downward fall into a spiral. The water caught him on the chest and, at once, he seemed to rocket downwards, bouncing like a piece of plastic between the water and the rock as he went. Then the seven yards were done and he was clear of the shaft. Byrne, barely conscious, was thrown away. The smack into the water below took the last shred of awareness away and soaked it in black.

Over in an instant. Byrne had known, the second he had slipped, that the last of his luck was done. No more escapes. No more reprieves. And it hadn't really bothered him at all.

Oblivion welcomed him.

"Richard! Richard! Come on Richard!" That voice was vaguely familiar somehow.

Byrne coughed. He coughed and coughed until his throat was raw with pain. In between coughs he gagged on the water and phlegm coming up. He opened his eyes and light poured into him, flooded him, and every cell in his body recoiled with the shock. He swore

profusely and screwed them shut.

A hand on his shoulder; he winced with pain. The voice quickly apologised and the touch was withdrawn. Now where had he heard that accent before? Irish. It was definitely Irish. But who...?

Good Lord! thought Byrne, *Surely not?* He sat up, desperate to see, and a wall of pain and nausea slapped him back to the floor.

"Easy now. Easy. You'd best be resting awhile."

"I'll be fine," Byrne managed to croak, "Just give me a minute." He waited for his head to clear, his mind, nevertheless, racing with hysterical questions. *Was it her? Was it really her? What on earth was she doing there? How could she possibly be mixed up in all of this?* And finally it became too much, and Byrne forgot about the pain and the light and the exhaustion and the cold, and turned and looked. And there was Ciara Kelly, soaked to the skin, her blonde hair matted down the side of her face, dripping. What a wonderful sight, and yet... He had imagined, for some reason, that she might be smiling, but her eyes seemed harder than they had before and her mouth was set in a firm, grim line.

"Good, she said, before Byrne had had a chance to say a word. "Now get yourself over to the bed. Get those clothes off. There's a towel in the top drawer over there."

"Ciara!" said Byrne, "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Trying to maintain my sanity," Ciara Kelly said, with a sigh. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, thanks," he lied. He took his time in getting to his feet. Then he glanced around, taking his surroundings in for the first time. And his heart sank. A cavern, and surrounding them was the underground lake Byrne had glimpsed from the waterfall shaft earlier. They were on a circular island of marble, perhaps ten yards in diameter, illuminated from above by a single spotlight. Steps led down to the water, and the fall itself was about twenty yards away. The island was furnished with a bed, a chest of drawers, a wardrobe, a dressing table, a full length mirror and a dining table with two chairs. All Edwardian. And a second, smaller island, connected by walkway, had a toilet, sink and a bathtub, all with brass fittings. And this was all the typically eccentric grandiosity that Byrne was beginning to

recognise as Weinstein's own particular trademark. This was a prison. He was no closer to escape than he had been above.

"Nice cavern you have here," he said flatly, "I take it you're acquainted with Professor Weinstein them?"

"We've met," Kelly replied.

Then, despite himself, a large grin broke out across his face. Never mind all that - how wonderful it was to have company again! "Christ, you're a sight for sore eyes, Ciara. For a while back there I didn't think I was ever going to see anyone again." And she tried to smile, but the smile wavered, flickered, trembled at the corner of her mouth. She looked small and afraid. So Byrne put his arms around her and held her close. "Don't worry Ciara, darling, everything will be alright, you'll see. We'll get out of all of this."

She pushed him away. "Don't call me darling," she said bitterly, "and I hope you're going to back that condescension up with something solid, because *I* sure as fuck can't see how everything's going to be alright."

Byrne was stung by that. The girl was evidently in shock. "Now look here Ciara," he said sternly, "I've been through some pretty horrible things over the past few hours, but I've survived. I'm here and I'm bloody well going to get out of here. And so are you. Is that understood?"

She sighed. "Well you'll excuse me if I reserve my optimism for when I see some tangible proof of that. I'm sorry, Richard. I shouldn't have barked off like that. You don't exactly find me at my best at the moment."

"Believe me, I understand," said Byrne. He spotted a packet of tobacco lying beside her and felt a sudden craving. Ciara noticed his gaze and laughed, and the laugh momentarily broke the tension.

"I suppose you're not going to complain too much about hand-rolling now," she said, reaching over. Quickly and dexterously she rolled two of the little tubes up. They smoked for a minute in silence, Ciara gazing at the waterfall. Then she swung round to face him again, and the fire was back in her eyes.

"Just who the hell are you, anyway?" she demanded. "And don't try giving me any of that engineering crap, because it won't stick? Is that

clear? I'm pretty damn sure - no, I'm confident, in fact - that it's you that got me mixed up in all of this in the first place, so you owe me an explanation."

"I'm a policeman, of sorts," Byrne said curtly. "That's all you need to know. Now tell how you came to be here. And quickly, Ciara, please. I've no idea how much time we have."

She glared at him for a second, evidently having expected complete deference. "Right. Fine," she said coldly. "Let's start with January the first, then - how poetic a place to begin - where I woke up to find myself unexpectedly alone. A note's all fair and well - though I feel obliged to point it out to you, Richard, that your handwriting is appalling - but I take it I can safely assume your decision to go into Oradea "on business" was not one you just reached in your sleep, so why didn't you tell me before? Yes, I was pissed off. For a while I was severely tempted to go, there and then, and stay with the volunteers for a few days and prove to you that - no - there are some things you can't just take for granted, such as seeing me that evening, as you so casually and arrogantly assumed you would be. But volunteers generally fall into two types: the my-life's-such-a-fucking-mess and all-people-are-tossers-and-I'm-the-only-bastard-in-the-world-doing-anything-worthwhile type and the sweet, sickeningly cheerful, sickeningly innocent, never-say-a-bad-word-about-anyone and tut-reproachfully-when-an-orphan-pisses-into-your-skirt type, and, endearing as both of these can indeed be at times, my mood was frankly fit for neither of them."

Byrne felt a smile approaching and squashed it. Ciara was obviously ok.

"There's a little old lady in the village," she continued, "who lives with her idiot of a drunkard son in a mountain hut; she's a dear; she took to me of an instant when first I came to Remeti. Actually I use the word 'little' metaphorically; in fact, she could quite easily out-buttock a cow, and I really do mean that. I'd been dying to take you up there to watch her force feed you chunks of raw pig fat, but I resigned myself to going alone. So we spent the morning together, toasting that men are all bastards - which translates surprisingly well - and swigging the most ghastly liquor I have ever tasted. On an

impulse, I then went into the orphanage for a couple of hours; I'd heard there was a nice bout of diarrhoea doing its rounds in there and I quite fancied seeing the look on your face when you caught your first, full-bodied whiff of *eau de orphanage* off of me when you got back in the evening. And then I went back to the bar to see, on the off-chance, if you'd got back yet, which you hadn't.

"Now, correct me if I'm wrong, Richard, but the impression I rather feel I received was that you were something of a stranger to these parts. Your first visit, you said. Here on business, you said. Was it not a reasonable reaction of mine then to have been just a little bit surprised to discover that in fact you were fine old friends with a certain Mr Ivanescu, who, at that particular moment, came marching into the bar, also to see if, on the off-chance, you had returned from Oradea. Yes, Richard, 'friends'; that's the word he used. "Bernie!" he cried, and he laughed so fondly, so wholesomely - Christ, I even think he slapped his thigh - that it was utterly beyond me, both as a born-again cynic and as a Psychologist, to suspect any ulterior motivation to his introduction. The barmaid had pointed me out to him, after a frantic gesticulation to her of what I can only assume to have been your height and build, and she'd nodded her head and then she'd shaken her head, and that's when she'd referred him to me. Oh yes, he explained, he and Bernie went back *years*! Hadn't you told me? The old rogue! Using that I've-never-been-to-Romania-before-and-look-how-fucking-perfectly-I-can-speak-the-old-lingo chat up routine again, no doubt. We laughed. What a pity your dick wasn't halfway as impressive as your guile, I remarked, and we laughed some more. So Mr Ivanescu explained to me that he'd seen you that very morning, waiting for the station bus at the intersection, and that you'd promised him faithfully you'd drop by his house when you got back. Ivanescu had been out in Bratca that day for longer than he'd initially expected, and was worried he might have missed you - *which was why he was asking in the bar if you'd got back yet*. You see? It was all quite logical. So when he invited me over to his house to await you there I found the prospect of your nonchalant entrance being shattered by the sudden discovery that your macho little secret was out rather appealing. And he didn't push - oh no. For a good half hour after I'd

readily agreed we chatted some more over another beer and a few more Snagovs. Then we left. We joked and laughed all the way there, and fuck me if the sun didn't come out and shine like it was summer. I didn't suspect a thing.

"I was never given the chance to actually suspect anything. When we got there he showed me into a sitting room, took my coat, sat me down, asked if I wanted some coffee and so on. He left me there for a few minutes, whilst he got my coffee - just left me - came back in with this and an ashtray, then he locked the door and told me I was his prisoner. Just like that. Of course, I thought he was joking, and I laughed. And he continued, apologising firstly that I had come to be mixed up in all of this and assuring me that I would almost certainly be free to go by the end of the day. It all depended on you, Richard. You, you see, were not at all the man you claimed yourself to be; you were an English spy working against the interests of him and his employer, and he intended to use me as bait to get to you. A note was being placed in your room at that very moment, informing you of my predicament; a note that, in all probability, would never be seen by your eyes because if 'plan A,' as he put it, went according to plan, you would not be alive to read it - I was just an extra precaution. Then he told me that the room was soundproofed, invited me to sleep on the settee if I so desired and that there were blankets in the cupboard, and left, locking the door behind him.

"And there I stayed for the next seven hours, pacing up and down and wondering what the hell I'd got myself into. I never saw Ivanescu again. I've often wondered since if you got to him and killed him? Did you? I suppose that's within the realm of your job description; killing people, I mean?"

Byrne sighed, dismayed at her place of hesitation. "I kill only when I have to," he said. "Yes, it is a part of my profession Ciara, but it's not one I particularly enjoy. I didn't kill Ivanescu. Some men died, but by their own hand. Perhaps I'd have done the job if they hadn't; they were out to kill me. I don't think Ivanescu was amongst them." He sighed again. "Go on. What happened after the seven hours?"

She looked at him, and seemed to shudder. "Well," she said, "what *did* happen after the seven hours? Perhaps you can tell me? One

moment I was there, sat at the table, desperate, I might add, for a piss, and the next I was here. In an instant. And the yank was sat there on the bed, where you are. 'Miss Kelly, I believe,' he said. 'You have stumbled upon a drama indeed.' Or something like that; I can only paraphrase. 'Allow me to introduce myself,' he said, 'I am Professor Donald Weinstein, probably the most important man in the world at this moment - I will explain to you why shortly. I employ Mr Ivanescu, with whom you are acquainted I believe, and I wish to apologise now for the confusion which has arisen from the deception I chose to present to him. For several months now he has been supervising a heroin smuggling operation funded by myself, under the belief that I am merely a rich and crooked American wishing to increase my wealth by expanding my business into his country. I chose not to tell him of my research and its enormous implications, and the real reason I set the operation up, and I admit that my doing so has resulted in a rather unanticipated and undesired sequence of events, of which you are a small part. I over-estimated Ivanescu, I'm afraid. His emotional reaction to Mr Byrnes's intervention in our proceedings - which, actually, *was* the real reason for my setting the whole operation up - quite surprised me. You see he met with Mr Byrne last night, under the impression - as Byrne gave it to him - that he was interviewing a potential agent for the English end of our smuggling route. He e-mailed me for my decision and I, knowing, of course, exactly who Byrne was, faxed him back my normal consent, because I knew Byrne was there and alert and I didn't want *him* to do anything rash. And then I faxed Ivanescu again, two hours later, to tell him I'd discovered Byrne to be a spy I'd had previous dealings with; that he would have to shut the operation down immediately, because Byrne, no doubt, would have alerted someone by now; that I very much wanted Byrne *alive*; and that he was to meet with Byrne in Oradea - as they had pre-arranged - get him back to Remeti and contain him there. Ivanescu panicked, and I'm still amazed. He didn't go into Oradea, because he thought he'd be walking into trap, and he decided, despite my specific instructions, to take it upon himself to kill Byrne as retribution for his intervention. Quite furious, he was. Quite terrified, in fact. Absolutely convinced, I think, that I was

secretly mad about our discovery and determined to punish him for it unless he somehow made it up to me. He just assumed I wanted Byrne dead. I did try to reason, but I still didn't want to tell him the whole story and, you see, talking nicely to a Romanian when you are in authority and they're convinced they're in trouble only puts the fear of God into them even more. Communism. Dictatorship. Secret police. We westerners are completely oblivious to the meanings of these things and the effects they have that never go away. If I had barked his incompetence down the 'phone at him he'd probably have done exactly as I asked him to. Still, there we go. The event has passed and without disaster, except that you are here instead of Byrne and therefore several months of planning have gone to waste. Yet, as I speak, plan B's final cogs are grinding - nay, smoothly turning - into action, and I've no doubt the company I desire will be with us shortly.'

"Us. He paused for a moment and I knew then that any I hope I'd had of being 'free to go by the end of the day' was gone completely. 'As it happens,' he said, 'I have a certain need for a, shall we say, damsel. Since you and Mr Byrne are already known to one another it would be fitting - ironically fitting, one might even say - that you fill this role.'

"And, from that point onwards, things got considerably more bizarre. He went on to describe his genius to me, and his invention and all the things he could do with it. Are you familiar with all of that? Good, I don't think I could retell that part very well. It sounded like bollocks to me; it sounded like the ravings of a complete and utter lunatic. Except, of course, that I had seemingly moved from Remeti to here in less than a second - and here is apparently somewhere in Switzerland, though I've only his word for that."

"I'm afraid he's right," said Byrne. "We are in Switzerland. This is his base. And everything else he's told you about his technology is also true. All of it. Believe me, I felt the same scepticism as you do at first, but I've been proved wrong on all counts. There's no possible alternative explanation."

Ciara sighed. "Perhaps if he hadn't been American I might have taken him more seriously. Shit. That rather changes a lot of things, doesn't it?"

"A lot," said Byrne flatly. "I don't like to think about it." Then he added, "What do *you* think people will do with Weinstein's device, Ciara?"

"What do I think people will do with it?" She frowned. "I don't know. Well, let me think. I suppose they'll all spend some time being like kids with new toys for a while, copying all the things they've ever wanted for themselves and showing them off to their friends, and then getting pissed off that their friends have got them all too. And then they'll get *really* pissed off when they discover that the people they *don't* like also have them. I mean, imagine how the family that's struggled for years just to get by will feel about the scrounging bastard down the road, who's never done a day's work in his life, being as well off as them. They'll say, 'We deserve this break after all our hardship; he sure as hell doesn't; he should be made to work a few years and *then* he'll appreciate it.' And who's going to go to work when there's no reason to do so? We're still going to need doctors and nurses, teachers, researchers, a military, and all manner of other professions, yet all of this will have to be voluntary. Sure, there'll be more people to do the jobs, since funding will no longer be a problem, and more people will be able to train for them for the same reason; but there's only so many bedpans you can clean out for the love of it. A few will continue to work, but the vast majority of people, I would think, will be out of employment like a shot. And then the non-workers will start getting suspicious of the workers, wondering what it is that motivates them to do it. Such concepts as 'doing the work because it has to be done' and 'doing the work because it's enjoyable' will be way over their heads; they'll be looking for a hidden agenda. They'll start resenting the power the workers have and the lack of power they - the non-workers - have over them. They'll get suspicious. They'll get aggressive.

"It'll all change over time. At first, everyone'll be excited and well-pleased with themselves, but gradually divisions will occur and hostility will increase. People will get bored with their lives and start creating things to fill the void that work once filled, I suppose. Too much free time never has done anyone any good. It could get quite nasty, I think. We're not ready for an invention like this, really; we're

a long way from being ready. Well, I might be wrong."

And you might not be wrong, thought Byrne, suddenly depressed. He said, "Well, what happened next?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Weinstein bled himself dry eventually. Then he left. Since then I've had to endure an eternity of my own company. Three square meals a day appear on that table over there and that's the only inclusion of the outside world into my cave that I experience. And then you dropped through that hole in the ceiling.

"Anyway," she said, suddenly angry again, "what happened to you in Remeti? *Was* there a note in your room? Did you just ignore it?"

"I never went back to my room," Byrne said, slightly defensively, "I thought it too dangerous. So I don't know if there was a note or not. I'm really quite dreadfully sorry, Ciara; if I'd have known about it then of course I'd have come after you. As it was, the whole operation was a bit of a mess and I thought it best to get out as quickly as I could. I really had no idea you were in trouble."

Byrne asked Ciara to roll him another cigarette and he sat for a while in silence, morosely, trying to work out what to do next. It was still hard to convince himself that he hadn't actually escaped, that all the risk and pain he had endured in getting here were all for nothing; that Weinstein had both planned the waterfall as part of his tests and known that Byrne would take it. Damn the man. It was all quite sickening. And here was Ciara Kelly, under Weinstein's captivity, and the confirmation that she also was part of the scientist's plans for him. Part of the tests. What could that mean? So far they had tested his speed, his endurance, his strength, his stamina, his ability to perform under immense stress; and these were all focused on his own ability to survive - an instinct which can be formidable in sometimes the meekest of men, and for only selfish reasons. What about a test to examine his ability to protect a second party under similar conditions: someone untrained; an innocent bystander; *a damsel in distress*? Could he protect her? *Would* he protect her? And how would he cope if he failed? Byrne looked at Ciara and felt a wave of dread overcome him. Good God, the scientist was a monster. How could he even think of harming the girl?

And then Byrne suddenly realised that he wasn't deducing this at

all; he knew it; he could remember it; *it had happened to him before*. The déjà vu was back, and so powerfully that somehow all the objects around him were objects he knew and could recall. Crazy. *Crazy!* Yet that wardrobe - could it be that it contained another set of his clothes within? He opened it up, and there they were. The table - didn't it have a scratch across the grain near the centre? He examined it, and there it was. The basin's hot tap shrieked when it was turned on. Yes. The toilet didn't flush when you pulled the lever - the contents simply de-materialised. Yes! How was this possible? How? How could he know all these things?

And Ciara. She was suddenly a shock to see. Somehow wrong. Somehow unnatural. He closed his eyes and heard, distinctly, her screams. She shouldn't have been there. She was *dead*, for Christ's sake.

And then he heard them, mixed in with the screams; little sniggers, little chortles, little snippets of giggle. Like it was all so funny.

"Richard?" said Ciara. "What is it?"

Byrne opened his eyes and looked at her coldly.

"You're a lying bitch," he said. "Now tell me what really happened."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ORIGINAL YOU

A LOOK of utter astonishment. A look of horror. A flicker of guilt. Then she recomposed herself.

"What the hell are you talking about? You're crazy. You've lost it. I've told you what happened."

Byrne needed to think. It was as if the air itself held the thoughts, the secrets, the memories; as if pacing up and down through it might somehow soak them up. But how could they be memories? They told him he'd been here before and yet, categorically, he knew that he had not. But the sounds, the sights... Everything was just so damnably familiar. Perhaps he had been here before and subsequently hypnotised into forgetting the experience; this idea appealed to Byrne: it was logical; it made sense; it was *possible*, for Christ's sake. But the more he contemplated it, the more faded and distant the memories became. They would not be summoned by an invented recollection. Byrne rubbed his forehead and paced up and down a little more.

"I've been here before," he said eventually. "Here. In this cavern; with you. And then I had to save you. But I didn't. I tried, but I didn't. Only you didn't die, did you? Weinstein teleported you away at the last moment. I *thought* you'd died, but you hadn't. That was the next test, wasn't it? Dealing with defeat."

"Richard, listen to yourself. You're talking gibberish. Just calm down. Ok? Look at me."

Byrne looked at her. "You knew," he said, "who I was, right from the start. Right from when we first met in Remeti. *You knew*."

And finally it came to him. The whole, terrifying truth in a whole, horrifying lump. Byrne stared at Kelly in astonishment. Good God, had he been blind? How had it not occurred to him? How in the

name of heaven had he failed to realise such a possibility?

He sat down, shakily.

"I - I - have been duplicated," he said.

"You spiked my drink whilst I was with Ivanescu. A sedative. That's why I felt so tired that evening. When I was unconscious Weinstein teleported us here and duplicated me. Then he transported me back to Remeti and held the duplicate here for tests. Now he wants to see how well the duplicate fared by comparing his progress in the tests to mine. That's what the whole Remeti business was about. That's what these tests are about."

Ciara's mouth settled slowly into a hard, firm line, and her eyes stopped pretending to be innocent. It was all the confirmation he needed. Damn the treacherous bitch. He'd wipe the smug confidence off her face yet. "The duplicate escaped," he said triumphantly. And this remark had absolutely the desired effect: a very soft, but sharp, intake of breath and a slight, sudden widening of the eyes.

"How... " she said.

"I don't know how. But I know. The duplicate escaped. And he'll be back."

"Yes indeed, Mr Byrne, but not, as you suppose, with all guns blazing."

Weinstein. He'd materialised on the walkway to bathroom island with a gun in his hand that was covering Byrne very carefully. Slowly, he walked over to them. "The original Byrne," he continued, "is still very much my prisoner. He might not be here, but I assure you my influence is not confined to this mountain alone. Currently he and Miss Adams are contained within a steel cell within Miss Adams' apartment. For the moment this suits my purposes, but soon I'll bring them here. Credit where credit is due, I might add, his escape was indeed something of a surprise for me. As, in fact, is our current predicament. Now how the hell did you know of your double's existence, let alone his escape?"

Byrne was staring at Weinstein. The last six and a half sentences had passed him by completely unnoticed. He could not speak. He tried to, but the words got stuck in his throat, confused and useless. There was no neat little sentence or phrase that summed up how he

felt. There was nothing, now. Nothing.

The original Byrne...

How could it be possible? All his memories, all his thoughts, all his feelings... They seemed so real, so vivid, yet they belonged to another man. *Another man*. How could this be so? How? Not for a moment had this possibility occurred to him. Not for a second; and if it had, he would have laughed at the idea.

Facsimile memories downloaded into an empty shell. He was artificial; man made; machine made.

"I am the duplicate," he said flatly.

Weinstein realised he had slipped and sighed. "Not exactly a duplicate, no," he said, "You see, I made a few changes here and there - improvements, I hasten to add. Whilst you were still in your data state my mouse and I cleared up a few arteries, fixed a broken bone that had not mended properly, replaced scar tissue here and there with healthy sample duplicates taken from nearby, and practically replaced your entire respiratory system - there wasn't much that could be done with the old one, I'm afraid. I would not test you if you were just a duplicate, Mr Byrne - who would consider an exact reproduction to be any different from the original? I test you because I altered you. I test you because you are altogether a better Byrne now. But these changes are *tiny* compared to the changes I could have made. If you had lost a limb I could have replaced it. If you were riddled with cancer I could have removed it. I could treat heart disease, arthritis, diabetes, obesity. I could change a male into a female and vice versa. The list is endless. Once again, Mr Byrne, I ask you to extend your vision to that of my technology and appreciate the benefits on offer."

"Still," said Byrne, "I am not the original Byrne."

Weinstein sighed again. "Mr Byrne, I feel that all this talk of 'originals' and 'duplicates' has misled you. Look, it is an unavoidable fact of physics that to measure matter at such an intricate level as my invention does involves altering the state of that matter itself. The *original* is inevitably destroyed in *any* such transaction: duplication, transportation; regardless. If an object is transported from A to B - *transported* - it is not the physical matter of that object that flies through the air or down a cable, it is its *digital description*. Thus it is

not the *original* object which arrives at B at all, but a *duplication* of that object. As I said to you earlier, transportation is a useful application of duplication - not the other way around. The original Richard Byrne, then - as in the physical matter that your mother gave birth to - was destroyed the moment he was transported for the first time: from your room in Remeti, to here. Come to that, the original matter your mother gave birth to was destroyed long, long ago through natural cell regeneration. I refer to the man currently in Zurich and in the company of Miss Adams as the 'original' purely because he is an exact copy of the actual original, whereas you are not; you are different. Mr Byrne, I fear you are asking philosophical questions that have no answers. You are here. You are genuine. This is all that matters. Think of yourself, if it helps, as one of two siamese twins that have only just been separated. It is not a far-fetched analogy.

"But look, please excuse my lack of tact; I really would like to get back to this business of your sudden insight into the experiences of the original's stay with us. I know for a fact you haven't met him. I'm pretty sure - no, I know - you didn't know somehow of his existence in our conversations. How could you have been so convinced I was part of some Russian hoax if you'd known that? How then? How? Please, Mr Byrne, how?"

"I don't know," said Byrne, "I really can't say. The odd dream, I think. A few vague memories. Mostly feelings of *déjà vu*. Is this what you expected?"

"What... *telepathy*? Are you serious?" Weinstein stared at Byrne for a full minute before shakily pulling out a packet of JPS and lighting up. "I'm a scientist, Mr Byrne," he said eventually, "I don't consider telepathy, or any other supernatural phenomena to be within the domain of my prediction. And this is hardly a good time to be going about a re-evaluation. No. This is, I assure you, quite definitely not what I expected."

Byrne helped himself to a cigarette, and a light from the American's Zippo. He found himself feeling oddly relaxed. Weinstein looked dejected now. Those last few remarks had been made bitterly. He was clinging to his cigarette and looking grimly at the floor. Kelly,

beside him, said nothing. She looked faintly bored by the situation. Absently she rolled herself a cigarette and lit it. She studied the wardrobe for a while, blowing her smoke slowly towards it.

"Well," said Weinstein, "there's little point in continuing the tests, Mr Byrne. Things were bad enough as they were, without this little revelation. I suppose it was one of these *déjà vu* experiences that alerted you to the dangers of the water tank test, yes? Well that's it, then. The whole thing's been a complete waste of time. I can't compare your performance to the control if the control is acting as a historical variable. Not if I want to be able to live with myself, at any rate."

More silence. It was as if they were all awaiting some dreadful fate on this little island, as if they were the last three people in the world and dry of conversation. Finally, and with a shake of the head, Weinstein said, "Forgive me my silence, Mr Byrne. I will admit to feeling somewhat deflated by this complication. It should not irritate me as much as it does, for that you are here and alive at all is cause enough for me to congratulate myself. Oh, if I could only feel as logically I deduce. But I am a perfectionist. I aim for one hundred per cent achievement, knowing that fifty per cent would be satisfactory, but when only seventy or even eighty per cent is accomplished I cannot help but feel crushed. And this is a dangerous state to endure, for now all of my glorious advances put together seem as dust to my few failings. The lethargy cycle, Mr Byrne: at this particular moment I have no desire to do anything, for fear that I will inevitably fail; and the longer I remain in this state of inactivity the more I will believe this."

He appeared to reach a decision. Weinstein withdrew a small, plastic box from his pocket. He pressed a button on it and said, "Remove the girl and secure her." Kelly looked sharply at him at this. She was about to demand an explanation, but then she disappeared.

"Ciara?" said Byrne, "I thought she was on *your* side."

"She is a thorn in my side, Mr Byrne," said Weinstein grimly, "she plays with my emotions like a toy, because, I think, the irony amuses her."

"Bitch." He spat the word. "Like so many of her kind. One

moment she is warm, the next she is cold. On and off, like a tap. She manipulates me on the whim of her mood, and she thinks that that makes her powerful. I sent her to Remeti to bring you back to me. I never asked her to screw you. No offence, Mr Byrne, but you were hardly in any state to gratify her. Her only interest in the act was to get at me; to remind me that my greatness is not so great that it affords her. And this insolence, this total lack of respect for my abilities gnaws at me. It gnaws, and it gnaws all the more for my complete understanding that in no logical sense do I have any right to be offended by it. We are not a couple, we are not attached in anything other than a purely professional sense, and she has the right to sleep with whom she chooses. But she knows that I desire her. She knows that I, as all men, am incomplete without the satisfaction of my more primitive desires. And she knows that I, of all men, would be without this inherent weakness if at all it were possible. It is a weakness I can live with: I *chose* to lead this solitary existence and in the full knowledge that it would ill-afford me the opportunity to nourish my sexual appetite, and, to be honest, Mr Byrne, I find the thrill of intellectual achievement far more satisfying to my soul than a mere carnal fumbling in the dark. It is not at all that I *need* Miss Kelly; it is that I cannot have her which irks me and that she goes endlessly out of her way to insinuate this point. At first she was to me just an attractive young woman of sufficient intelligence to be of use to my operations, but now - and through her own provocation - she has become a symbol to me of all that I have failed to achieve.

"Are we not taught, Mr Byrne, through countless jokes and jibes and *mano a mano* tales of macho bravado, that free sex is not a gift at all, but a prize? Are we not taught that the successful sexual hunt encapsulates - nay, *defines* - the very essence of manhood and male achievement? Advances in science and technology are mere threads in the tapestry of life by comparison. A man who has made these leaps in understanding, but who does not frequent the sexual act, is only partly a man by society's definition; a man who makes no such academic effort, but who earns sex in abundance, is labelled a man unquestioningly. Sex is not about intimacy and love; it is about power and domination. It is part of our role as men to dominate the female

gender, and be this aspect of our identity outdated or sexist or unethical we still feel it, deep down; all of us. We can repress these feelings and logically criticise them, yes; but logic and repression will not make them go away. Still we are drawn to the woman for her fragility and vulnerability. Still it is the very remoteness of her spirit from the vibrant, passionate throes of blood stained animalism which is her allure. We wish to see her naked, yes, but the strip only begins with the clothes - the clothes are just the first layer of protection between her animal and her presented serenity. We are not content just to gaze upon her nudity, for her indifferent eyes incense us to push further through the layers, to tear each of them violently away: her dignity, her intellect, her rationality, her identity; until she is just an animal, just a piece of flesh, as all other flesh, broken and robbed of all the virtues which once made her different. We want to strip her of everything. We want her to beg us to stop. We want to hear her scream her surrender.

"The feminists are right in one sense, Mr Byrne, for indeed we are pathetic. We imagine our sexual victories to make us conquerors, yet we are the conquered in every sense, captured and enslaved by our lust and desire. The women know it. And it's neither beyond nor beneath them to use whatever levers they can find against us. Miss Kelly wishes only to rob me of my confidence. Always through insinuation. Why? Because she can. It infuriates me. I shall not have it! When I'm finished with her she *will* have the proper respect for me, for I shall see her animal and her animal's animal. She will live in awe and dread of me for what I shall do to her."

The scientist had worked himself up into a rage and his hands were flying about him in violent gesticulations, his gun a bizarre and embarrassed victim of their rapid tos and froes. He had seemed barely aware of Byrne throughout this outburst, but now he shot the spy a far more definite look of acknowledgement. "And you, Mr Byrne," he said, "are you not angered that she used you merely as a tool to get at me?"

Byrne lingered on his reply. Eventually, casually, with a wry smile plucking the corner of his mouth and the distant look of fond memory in his eyes, he said, "Actually, I've only got your word for it that she

did."

Weinstein went red and purple. Then he jumped across the space between them and pushed his gun into Byrne's throat. "If you will not speak frankly with me then I might as well kill you here and now, Mr Byrne. You are no longer required for experimentation, do you understand? The tests are over; your usefulness has expired." And throughout these lines Byrne leaned slowly backwards, as if cowering from the threat and its associated spittle, until Weinstein was leaning over him. Then he kicked the American's feet out from beneath him and the man fell sharply, automatically putting out his gun hand to break the fall. Byrne jumped to his feet and delivered a kick to the abdomen, then another to the right hand, and the gun skittered across the marble island and into the water with a splash that was barely audible over the distant roar of the waterfall. Weinstein yelped with the shock of the pain, then promptly he vanished and Byrne's kick to the head sailed uselessly through the air.

Byrne smirked. He had expected as much, but it had still felt good.

And then, predictably, the island and the cavern disappeared around him, but this time to black. The black seemed to last for both a second and a lifetime, and then he was in a metal cage in a large, whitewashed, brightly lit room. And in the corner to his left a large screen protruded from the wall, above which the words 'PACC UNIT' were embossed in the grey, plastic surround.

And then Ciara appeared, in the same, seated position and with the same look on her face as the second before her departure from the cell - her brow was furrowed, her lips were slightly parted, her eyes were outraged and ablaze. She fell backwards, expecting the support of the bed, and swore as she hit the ground. But she seemed to come to terms with the change in environment with well-practised ease. She got quickly back to her feet and marched over to Byrne's cage. "What's going on?" she demanded, "What's he up to now?"

"Don't you know?" said Byrne, "I thought you were supposed to be in on all of this."

She glared at him, as if this was an utterly ridiculous thing to say, and then her features forcibly softened themselves to look lonely and frightened. In another predicament Byrne would have laid her across

his knee and spanked her black and blue for that. "Richard," she pleaded, "I want to get out of here. You've got to help me."

"How do I know this isn't just another test," he demanded, "You've already proved your acting ability admirably, why should I believe you now?"

"You're the one with the telepathic intuition," she snorted, "what does that tell you?"

Byrne sighed and pointed to the screen. "Do you know how to work that thing?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, "But Weinstein logs me in first. I don't know the password."

"Passwords are often easier to guess than people suppose," said Byrne, thinking aloud. "Think. What sort of words would he chose. Ignorance? Duplication?"

"Oh come on, Richard: he's much too intelligent for that. It's probably a meaningless code or something. We haven't got a chance."

Weinstein appeared by the screen. Three men appeared with him; three large men, all armed with machine guns. Byrne had a very bad feeling about that. But Kelly jumped to her feet and marched across to the scientist, trying to appear both outraged and lovable at the same time. "Donald, dear," she said sternly, "I confess you have me utterly confused now. What on earth is going on?"

Weinstein smiled at her. He was the embodiment of calmness now, relaxed and composed. "Your words lack their usual ornamentation of profanities, *dear*," he said, "is something troubling you?"

She gazed at him, knowing that something was wrong. "Can't we just do away with Byrne and push on with the programme?" she said, stumbling slightly over the words, "You said that this experiment was only a side issue. There's no point in brooding over it."

"Side issues are important, Ciara. How many times have I told you that? I have a responsibility to explore the complete implications of my technology before releasing it upon the poor, innocent masses. And I intend to be appropriately thorough. Surely you know me better than to assume I would turn a blind eye to any aversive findings I might uncover?" The scientist rubbed his right hand. "Although I will admit," he continued, "to having seriously considered the doing

away with Mr Byrne bit. An hour's contemplation, however, reminded me that Mr Byrne's degrading of me was at least partly motivated by the interests of his country, which is a damn sight more noble than your motivation."

Ciara paled. "What do you mean?" she said, and now her voice trembled. "I haven't 'degraded' you. When did I degrade you?"

"With every look," said Weinstein happily, "with every deed. I shall not list the incidences individually, for most of them are seemingly insignificant little remarks that you have made, which would sound ridiculous if described as grievances. I will not demean myself yet again by attempting to justify what I know to be true."

He turned to Byrne and said, "At first, you see, I wasn't even aware what Miss Kelly was doing to me: her attacks on my character were so subtle that they slipped through my conscious attention completely undetected. I just felt bad, and then increasingly bad as all the little comments began to build up in my subconscious; it is not one insinuation which damages a person's self-esteem; one insinuation amounts to nothing - it could be a joke, sarcasm, even a simple mistake - it is the cumulative effect of many of them which starts the gnawing unease off. So I was unhappy and even more unhappy that I didn't know why I was unhappy. But then I introspected a while and discovered the reason. Now I take action and the situation is resolved. Yes; I am a clever man. I think, now, that I can believe in myself again."

Kelly made a last resort attempt to redeem herself. She came across to the scientist and put an arm around him. "Donald," she said, innocently, "how could you think such things? Have I been so flippant? If I have then I'm truly sorry. I can be a bit short at times, I know, but I don't mean anything by it. That's just me, I thought you knew that. If it upsets you then I'm sorry. Now that I know how you feel about it I'll try harder in future, ok?"

Weinstein shook his head. "No, my dear," he said, "it is not ok. The problem is that you've negatively insinuated so many times now that I cannot help but observe insinuation in every comment you make, regardless of whether or not it actually intended any. Paranoia, I believe you psychologists call this. Yes? So, you see, I won't be

convinced that you've changed until I know for a certainty that you're terrified of ever making such insinuation again. For that to be, I'm afraid, you must be punished."

"What do you mean, punished?" she cried, "Donald, I've said I'm sorry, why can't we leave it at that?"

"The time for apologies has long passed," said Weinstein as he swept over to the computer screen. "Right then, men," he said to the guards, "you know what to do. Do it."

The three men all moved, as if they had just that moment been switched on. Their weapons still slung over their shoulders, they advanced on Kelly, who backed away from them, looking around her for possible exits that she might have missed. "Donald!" she cried, "Please! Please! Donald, wait. Please, just wait a minute. Please!" But the scientist's attention was now fully engaged upon the screen. Now it was illuminated in an array of softly coloured windows and diagrams, and his fingers flew over them, pressing icons here and there with well-versed ease. New diagrams and charts and graphs appeared as he worked, new windows opened up and old ones closed down. Occasionally he would speak, asking the machine for the sizes of certain parameters or setting the values of others, and to these comments the computer would respond to him in a smooth feminine voice; confirming, replying, querying where necessary. He continued to ignore Kelly as the men took hold of her. One of them held her arms from behind, another held her legs; the third proceeded to strip her. She was wearing jeans, boots and a white T-shirt. The stripper removed the boots carefully, avoiding her attempts to kick him with exaggerated caution. Then he undid her belt and the buttons below, then he started to peel the jeans away. Just for a moment, as the guard holding her legs adjusted his grip so that the jeans could be pulled right off, her legs broke free. Bare from the hips to the knees, where they were bound together by the denim, they punched the air in desperate aggression to the tinkling compliment of her dancing belt buckle. Then she was secured again, around the thighs, and the jeans were removed completely. The undresser reached up into the confines of the soft, white cotton of the T-shirt and stole from within a pair of briefs that he slid down her legs and over her feet.

"NO!" she shrieked hollowly. It was more of a noise than a word. *Already an animal*, thought Byrne, as he gripped the bars in frustration, his heart racing. The guard tore the T-shirt from her body and then the bra. And then he dragged her across the room by her hair, where he and the others lifted her up to a pair of steel clamps embedded in the concrete and secured them around her biceps. They left her hanging there, in the crucifix position, sobbing, gasping, and returned to Weinstein's side.

"Read the human body on the wall," Weinstein told the computer. "Save this description as 'Ciara A'." Then, "Verify." Then, "Ok. Stand by."

He nodded at the guards.

"Weinstein!" Byrne shouted, as the men took up their positions, "don't do this. Don't for Christ's sake do this. She's just a girl. She's just a girl!" And then they opened fire. The noise of the three guns was deafening, but there was nothing so loud in the room as the scream. Bullet after bullet splashed into her bronzed, delicate skin, spraying her and the white wall in her blood and flesh. Muscle and sinew exploded. Bone splintered and shattered. Still she screamed. It was an inhuman wail of pain that just went on and on, filling the room with her unbearable, unbearable agony. Then, suddenly, the scream seemed to drop out of her body. All the contorted muscles relaxed; her torn, ripped legs, that she had instinctively brought up in front of her to protect herself, dropped limply to hit the wall. For a while she stared, open-eyed, at nothing, and her punctured body convulsed and spasmed with the final throes of death. Then, with a last, confused look, her head flopped down over her leaking chest. And she was dead.

Byrne stood fixed to the spot in disbelief and horror. He couldn't breath. He couldn't speak. He couldn't cry. His body filled with the pounding of his blood and the echo of that scream. *To die like that. Oh God, to die like that...*

Only now did Weinstein look at Kelly. As he did his calm seemed to waver. He struggled, imperceptibly, to maintain his control, but his features betrayed him: his eyes opened a little wider, his lips fluttered and trembled, his nostrils flared. His whole body stiffened.

He turned quickly back to the screen. "Computer," he said hoarsely, "remove the female and save as 'Ciara B'." And the corpse vanished from the wall.

"You evil, evil bastard," Byrne whispered.

"Perhaps, Mr Byrne," said the scientist, "perhaps. I do feel now that the evil moment is indeed upon me, yes, but the evil hour has yet to come, I think. You have glimpsed but a snatch of the picture. I seek only to punish and deter - not to extinguish, not to eliminate. Wait before you judge me. Wait."

He turned back to his screen and continued to work, his fingers trembling slightly as they touched the controls. "There are two ways in which my technology allows me to cheat death," he said flatly. "The first is that, should I die, a back-up copy of myself can be retrieved and assembled. This is disadvantaged by the fact that the back-up lacks all the extra knowledge and experience accrued between his file's creation and the original's death. A second possibility is to merge the brain of the dead original with the body of the back-up. Using this latter technique, the person that is subsequently assembled is very much - insofar as a person can be defined by the memories and thoughts he keeps - the person who died. You will notice that the gunners deliberately avoided Miss Kelly's head; they did so under my instructions, so that I might implement this very procedure. The Ciara we are therefore about to see will have all the thoughts, all the memories, all the experiences of the Ciara we just saw shot to pieces, right up to the moment of her death."

The words slowly seeped their way in. Byrne had hardly heard them in his despair, but now they fell together. He understood. He was seized by hope, and immediately the hope seemed somehow pathetic, perverted and obscene. No, this would not repair; this would not undo. This wouldn't make it all ok, planned or not; especially if planned. The act hadn't been about killing Ciara; the act had been about bringing her to the point of utter pain and terror that every person prays they will never see. And they had witnessed it. They had seen the beauty and mystique simply cease to be in an instant. They had seen control break down, the person break down, and the child, the creature, the animal had exploded out of her, scattering

dignity with flesh across the room. Rape. Rape of the highest order. There was the act; there was the crime. And that could never be undone.

And yet, it had to be better than this, didn't it? Could it be possible? Could it? Byrne found that he didn't doubt the American's ability even slightly.

"Execute," said Weinstein to the computer. And there she was, her body beautifully, wonderfully unblemished - the gaping holes all gone and her eyes open and confused. Byrne gasped and sank to his knees, and Weinstein seemed barely able to contain his glee, or rather his relief. "Welcome back to the land of the living, Miss Kelly!" He exclaimed. "How does it feel to be an historic figure?"

She looked at him absently, then her gaze moved on. Ciara's eyes searched the room oddly. Her face was somehow as blank as the wall from which she hung. From the corner of her mouth a dribble of saliva ran down to her chin.

A flicker of doubt crossed Weinstein's face. "Come on Ciara. Don't keep us waiting. Say something. Please."

He started, suddenly, to sniff. He looked down. A thin trickle of urine was collecting on the floor beneath her feet.

Weinstein ran back to the PACC unit and demanded the condition of 'Ciara C'. "The composite is operating within all specified parameters," replied the computer smoothly. The condition of Ciara B's brain before integration? "The brain was undamaged, with an estimated three minutes and twenty-two seconds before clinical death." The condition of the composite's brain with reference to the original's? "The composite brain is operating within all specified parameters." Weinstein cursed loudly and violently and slammed his fist into the wall beside the screen. He ordered the computer to run its diagnostics procedure, specified the systems to be checked and paced nervously up and down for a few seconds whilst he waited for the result.

"All systems functioning correctly," reported the computer eventually.

He stared at the computer in disbelief. Then he threw back his head and hurled a string of obscenities at the ceiling. He looked back at the

screen and told himself, quietly, "Think. Think. Think. It must be something obvious. What is it? What?" He sighed and rubbed his eyes with trembling fingers. "Think, dammit. *Think*."

And Byrne had a sudden thought and looked at his watch. Weinstein noticed the movement; his mutterings stopped. He stared at Byrne for a moment. Then he said to the computer, "Run a full virus check."

"Weinstein," said Byrne, "I put a virus in your system, yes, but-"

"Yes I know you introduced a virus," Weinstein snapped, "I watched you put it on and then I found it and disabled it. But, of course, you didn't just place *one*, did you? You placed *two*, and the one I found was meant to hide the second. Very clever, Mr Byrne. Well, are you happy with the consequences?"

"It's not time for the virus to release its payload yet," Byrne protested.

"Your watch is wrong, Mr Byrne. You were held in data state for over an hour before coming here. It will be slow."

Byrne looked at his watch again and added the approximate delay. "But that still leaves at least four hours."

"Then perhaps it is as reliable as everything else made in your country!" Weinstein screamed. And, at that point, the computer reported forty one per cent of all executable files to be infected with a 'type seven' virus. The scientist gave Byrne a look of pure hatred, then he turned to the men behind him and said, "I must consult with my colleagues over this. We'll have to evacuate - we mustn't risk transmission. Computer, run escape procedure 'M one'."

A large opening to a flight of steps appeared to Ciara's left in that wall. Without further comment the scientist and the others ran across the room and left.

It could not have been the virus. Byrne was sure of that. Well, so what if it was? Virus or no virus, his priority had to be to get out of this cage and put a stop to this whole damn business now. And it had to be now. Whilst the confusion continued he could be certain at least that every move he made was his own and not the anticipated outcome of pre-arranged circumstances. No more tests. The moment, at last, was his again.

"Computer," he called, "remove this cage."

"Your voice pattern is not recognised," the computer reported calmly, "To instruct the PACC unit you must first enter the command password. Do you wish to enter the command password?"

"Yes," said Byrne. "Ignorance."

"Incorrect," the computer replied, "You now have two remaining chances."

What would it be? "Duplication," he tried.

"Incorrect. You now have one remaining chances."

From across the room, Ciara, or what had been Ciara, sighed, deeply and profoundly. She was gazing at the computer. A tiny hope ignited in Byrne. Could she be recovering? *Good God*, he thought, *whose to know the psychological side effects of being brought back to life?* Shock, of course there'd be shock; massive, immeasurable shock - but perhaps shock was all that it was.

"Ciara," he shouted, but, before he could get any further, the computer thanked him and removed the cage.

With no time to dwell on ironies and sad ironies at that, Byrne went over to the girl, and she followed him across the room with her gaze. "Ciara," he said again, but she made no reply. She stared at him for a while; curiously, mindlessly. And then, slowly, her eyes shut.

And now, at last, Byrne was free to do the work he was paid for; to smash, to kill, to destroy. All was clear in his mind. All was cold. It was not a negation of the fury, more that the fury was added fuel. The clarity of his thought dissolved the distractions away, cleared all the noise to one side, so that he could think, unhindered and uninterrupted; so that he was aware of all, and everything, and focused. He crossed the room quickly and demanded an inventory of firearms from the computer. It took him a few moments to work out the exact syntax required by the unit, but then he was armed and ready, with four spare clips of ammunition. Then he started on the long climb. He thought of nothing but his own movement and his surroundings, as if he were the omnipresent air itself, aware of all within its occupation. The steps twisted slowly to the left, a few degrees at a time, until a chink of light appeared ahead of him, which slowly widened to admit the whole of the exit. A figure up there,

silhouetted by the light, peered down at him and shouted, "Shut down the tunnel! Byrne's-"

The silhouette toppled forward as the bullets struck. The first must have hit him somewhere in his right shin, for that leg flew backwards and he seemed to revolve about his midriff with the torque imparted. He screamed; the second bullet shut him up. The silhouette crashed to the ground and shouting ensued. Byrne sprinted the last few yards and hurled himself out into the large hallway of Weinstein's house, where he skidded across the black and white tiles on his belly. Gunfire. He rolled over towards the nearest wall, picking out a target as he turned, over and over: a man above him, shooting from behind the landing balustrade. Byrne fired; a baluster splintered with a harmless ricochet. He fired again, and again, and the gunner's body shook with the successful impacts, then toppled over the rail and hit the tiles.

And then silence. Byrne lay beside the wall, waiting for movement or sound and despising his own breathing, for it was as thunder to his ears. He took a long, slow breath and held it. And at once, he could hear the other man's breath, a nervous, frantic gasp, coming from the dinning room doorway. Gunner number three burst out of the room, pivoting about the nearside frame with his gun ready. Byrne's finger got there first. There was a sharp crack as the bullets' impact broke the man's neck, and two red rosettes appeared in his face. They seemed to lift him up from the ground a little, to drain the life from him, mid-air, and then to dump him against the further doorframe. He slid down into a splayed out sitting position.

Byrne grunted and got to his feet. He took the hallway in once more and his eyes hesitated on the spot where the steps had led down to the hell hole below. They were gone. Only the pair of legs protruding from the polished tiles, blood still dripping from the right shin, cared to suggest they had ever been there at all.

The right hand door. It was shut. Byrne released what was left in his clip into the door and it swung, obligingly open. Cautiously, he walked into a bland little corridor that ran along the southern face of this, the eastern wing. White tiles, white walls and five white doors spaced along the wall to his left: 'Laboratory one,' 'Laboratory two,'

'Computer suite,' 'Conference room,' and, finally, 'Professor D J Weinstein.' Byrne tried the latter of these first. It was empty. And it was a large room, furnished with four desks - all with their respective IN and OUT trays; all with their respective desktop computers; all with their respective diaries placed in exactly the same spot on each desk, about an inch to the left of their respective blotters. *Four desks; one Weinstein*, thought Byrne. And then a new and horrifying thought occurred to him, and sent him running to the conference room.

And there they all were. As he threw the door to this room open they turned together to look at him. Four Weinsteins, identical to the last feature. They looked simultaneously shocked, then simultaneously smug as the amazement on Byrne's face registered.

Four Weinsteins. One of them said, "Your continual surprise at each new implication of my - our - technology does not do you credit, Mr Byrne. And this, in fact, is not a hitherto unimplied implication."

"You assume too much," said Byrne, "It's just that I thought even you weren't so egotistical as to do this."

"If, by 'egotistical' you mean that I think highly of myself then you're right: I am egotistical. I have ample reason to be. But ego had nothing to do with my own duplication. It was a simple matter of time, ambition and insurance. Quite simply, Mr Byrne, there is much too much to do and, as the saying goes, if you want something doing properly you have to do it yourself. Hence..." The scientist introduced his doubles with a wave of the hand. "Duplicate B here was in charge of the PACC equipment for the duration of your stay, duplicates C and D are permanently assigned to research. Together, I assure you, we are greater than the sum of our parts. And soon there will be still more of us: better, stronger, healthier Weinsteins; all thanks to your help. We will be many and we will be varied, but we will be undivided."

"A master race?" Byrne said, "Then you *are* just a fascist."

"Do not diagnose from one symptom alone," said Weinstein B.

"Sorry," Byrne corrected himself, "Fascists."

They ignored his comments and the Weinstein that Byrne presumed therefore to be Weinstein A, continued, "Well, you were right about one thing - it wasn't that virus of yours that spoiled my little lesson for

Ciara. None of the PACC files are corrupted. We're working on the theory that her death induced some sort of neural shock in her brain - that it behaves catatonically because it believes itself dead. It'll take a long time to research thoroughly, but we can go some way towards ratifying the theory by bringing back the entire backup copy I made of her before her death. So we haven't seen the last of Miss Kelly yet, I'm sure you'll be pleased to know. I don't see that this new discovery should interfere with the release of the portable PACC unit into society, do you? If one only looks in life one never achieves anything. I think now that I have tired of enjoying the lull before the storm: now the storm shall commence."

Byrne looked at his gun to check that it was still there, for the scientists all seemed blissfully unaware of its presence. Weinstein A noted the reference and said, "If I were you I'd put that thing down. It won't get you anywhere. You can't shoot all of us before the command to disassemble you is issued. We are all backed up and ready to be retrieved, just as the guards you no doubt killed are. We have no fear of death. And perhaps I should mention that Weinstein's E, F, G, and H are all monitoring this conversation from their hideouts; each of them have full, networked control over the PACC equipment in this room." He pointed to a large video screen behind Byrne, on which four more Weinstein's were peering into the room through point and click windows. Byrne looked quickly, and they all waved at him spontaneously. "You see, Mr Byrne? You have achieved nothing. There will be no grand finalé. No thrilling last chapter to this instalment of your life. But I note your resolution and the agreement with me it infers over the state of our societies. I - we - are flattered."

Byrne tried to keep hold of his determination and he kept the gun where it was. "Actually," he said, "I haven't yet reached that decision. But I will stop you. Not because of our societies, but because of you. Were you to release this invention of yours - which you won't - I doubt that your status as its genius creator would keep you satisfied for very long. Yes, you are intelligent. Yes, you are observant. Yes, you are - in more ways than I would normally care to admit - correct. But you are not an honourable man, Weinstein, nor, in any sense, a

wise one; you're an attention seeker, it's as simple as that. All that fuss you made over the whims of a single girl betrayed you: were you truly a visionary you could only pity her. The more and more powerful you become, the more paranoid and sensitive and insecure you will become, and, eventually, you will dispense with anyone who disagrees with you or criticises you, or who you even *suspect* might be *secretly* criticising you, just as easily as you did Ciara. You will rule by terror and intimidation; you will get madder and madder, until all the sense in the world is destroyed and you are resplendent in your insanity. You state science and society as justifications for your cause, but you are lying; you seek only power and worship and for the masses to feel weak and humbled before you. You speak of perfectionism and how it defines you, but, in your case, perfectionism is just euphemism for wanting everything your way - your lack of respect for human life is repulsive; you play with it like a selfish, spoilt little child: you *are* a child. You speak so scornfully of people deriving the whys from the whats and yet you yourself seem to take it entirely for granted that your own, personal whats imply a why beyond suspicion. You speak of narrow-mindedness and thoughtlessness, but were you truly thoughtful you'd appreciate that any successful transition to your technology must be a slow and gradual one. Advancement isn't built upon revenge; people must be taught and guided out of their ignorant ways, be this a philosophical proposition or not. You see, Weinstein, you propose that I have a choice, but, in fact, there is only one possible decision that I can make: either you are right about what people will do with your creation, in which case I must stop you, or you are wrong, in which case your subsequent frustration at how the ignorant masses defy you will drive you to madness and insanity sooner than had you been right, and therefore I must still stop you."

Weinsteins' eyes flashed with rage. Only Weinstein A had attempted to smile throughout this, but it was an artificial smile, that had flickered and wavered. "I have made an admirable debater out of you, Mr Byrne," he said, trying to appear indifferent to the criticism, "but you are, of course, completely wrong. How, for example, could my technology possibly be introduced *gradually*? How? It negates

every ethic, every construct there is. You could not just *phase it in*, like a new bus service. If governments restricted its use for the sake of long term integration the people would only rise against them, fuelled by their greed to have more. And governments would want nothing to do with my device, anyway: their very drive is to protect the status quo - of class, of power, of money. It's all or nothing, Mr Byrne, and therefore I'm the only way through which people will ever have access to this dream. And that my motivation is revenge is purely incidental - a man not so driven would still observe the same effects of such a technology upon the world. *Reason is beside the point.*"

"You miss *my* point, Weinstein. My objection is with you."

"Yes, but the axioms on which your objection is formed are false," Weinstein cried.

"You assume them to be false," said Byrne, "because it suits you. You, as the scientist you claim yourself to be, should surely only permit yourself the possession of such opinions on the basis of scientific research. Where is the research? Where are the findings? Show me."

"Common sense, man! Common sense! I don't need empirical research to prove to me that which is so obviously true. If people never made educated guesses based upon their experiences they'd never achieve anything. Scientist or not, I have to assume *some* things. Do you deny me that right?"

"Common sense? I thought common sense was 'little more than blatant narrow-mindedness'. Your words, Weinstein. Do you seek to reverse them now? Where do you draw the line between your common sense and their common sense? Where does it stop being blatant narrow-mindedness? Where does it start becoming educated guesses?"

"You twist my words!" the scientist cried. "And this is all utterly beside the point! I-"

"Yes, Weinstein," Byrne cut back in, "Sulk. Squeal. Scream, if you like. It becomes you. Sulk and whinge and whine like the little brat that you are."

"Enough of this!" barked Weinstein B suddenly, "He seeks only to

antagonise us. This is fruitless. Disassemble him now! Be done with it!"

"That's right, kill me! Be done with me! Better that than to have to listen to the truth. But all I'm using is the logic you so respect, Weinstein. Others can do that. Others can 'antagonise' you. It doesn't end with me."

"Logic?" said Weinstein B, "I hardly think so, Mr Byrne. You are like all the others: you pick pick pick, desperately, so that you can avoid facing the truth. The *real* truth. You are like the political correctness junkies, who would rather jump down the throats of seven year olds reading Noddy than confront the *real* issues of discrimination. Why should I listen to you? Why should I waste my time on you?"

"And you, Weinstein, you are like all the other cynics and pessimists: you hide your own inadequacies behind the wrongs of the world. You assume that your observation of societies' crimes is justification alone for your pitiful existence. But do you attempt to set an example? No. You seek only destruction. And excusing your childish desires by insisting their independence from the effect your invention will have is no redemption: you *want* people to kill each other. That's the point. You don't want to work with them and educate them, *you just want them to die*. 'Self-preservation', I believe was your term for that. 'Unwillingness to question oneself'. It ends, Weinstein. It ends here and it ends now. Or I'll shoot you dead and end it myself."

Weinsteins' looks of anger changed spontaneously to looks of amazement.

"You *are* mad!" exclaimed Weinstein C, just beating the others to the comment. "You have the cheek to stand before us and propose *our* insanity and then you come out with something like that! Regardless of our... intellectual differences, Mr Byrne, I assure you that it shall not end here and now. I thought my colleague made your hopeless position perfectly clear. You can do nothing to stop us. Nothing. What on earth causes you to believe otherwise?"

Byrne stood for a moment, thinking desperately. Could he take out all four men quickly enough? He thought that he could. But that still

left the other four. Was there a communications link - a nice, convenient wall socket he could put a bullet into? He could see none. What about the equipment in the room then? But there was so much of it; even if he did manage to destroy the relevant machines in time, presumably all that the distant Weinstains would have to do would be to teleport new ones in - perhaps they wouldn't even need to do that to carry out their threat. And even if he did manage to kill all four here and terminate the link with their faraway clones, what would he have achieved? Weinstein would still be alive in his secret locations, still powerful and his whereabouts unknown. But what were his alternatives? He doubted that simply running out of the room, the building, and down the mountainside would get him very far - they'd have him 'disassembled' before he'd got a yard. But if the best hope he had was a message to London to alert them to the situation then that was what he had to go for.

No. It just wasn't possible. Certain suicide. But if he gave in now, when would he have the chance to do something? It was now or never, it had to be. But he needed time. He needed time to find that innocent little cable that had to be here somewhere; he needed time for them to relax their guard so that, when he did act, he would have surprise on his side and the crucial extra seconds that that might give him.

Byrne lowered his gun, just a little. "Show me this backup copy then," he said. "Of Ciara. Show me you're telling the truth."

"Do it," said Weinstein A. "Mr Byrne," he added, "we are not so intolerant of criticism and opposition as you seem to assume. All we need is a head start. Once we've had that, once the PACC units have reached the level of distribution and penetration wide enough and dense enough to make any attempt to remove them by the governments of this planet a futile one, you and your double will be free to go to work as you see fit. That's a promise. You have my word."

"Why did my contact with my double surprise you, when you yourself have duplicates?" Byrne asked.

"Well..." Weinstein seemed pleased with the academic question. "I haven't experienced such contact. That is to say, I probably have - but

we all share the same environment and we talk to one another. Each of us knows the details of each other's days anyway. And our days are so similar. Dreams such as yours wouldn't seem unusual at all, you see."

"Ok," said Weinstein B, "We're ready. That wall, over there."

They all turned to look. Byrne used the moment to edge round the table slightly, and an earlier blind spot was removed.

He glanced, casually, down.

"Execute," the scientist told the computer. Byrne tore his gaze away from the cable for just a second, just to see, just to know. And she appeared. And Byrne suddenly understood. It was a moment of joy and a moment of horror. But it was, at last, the moment he'd been waiting for.

"Undivided." he whispered.

"COMPUTER!" screamed Weinstein A, "DIS-"

Byrne fired, and the scientist rocked back in his chair with a bullet between his eyes. His expression had no time to change; he sat dead in his chair with a look of pure terror on his face. Byrne didn't fire again. He knew he didn't need to. He put his gun down on the table and watched the other three faces melt away into nothingness. The four faces on the wall did the same. Just as the eyes of the girl on the wall wandered, so too did theirs: slowly, oddly; lost on the eerie path of oblivion.

It was over, then. With a single bullet he had finished it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ONE MONTH, THREE MONTHS; FOREVER

RICHARD BYRNE walked through the blank corridors of the MI6 building at Vauxhall feeling confused, angry and more than a little cheated. Something very odd was going on within the Secret Intelligence Service and somehow it seemed to concern him. People were looking at him strangely, suspiciously; people he had known and worked beside for years. Their conversations seemed nervous, slightly, and artificial, and full of bland pleasantries. Sport, television, the weather; they would talk about anything, it seemed, other than actual intelligence.

Since his return to headquarters, two days ago, he had effectively done nothing. He had written his report, handed it in, and then he had waited. A few general information documents had appeared in his IN tray to help him while the time away, but nothing of any secrecy or major importance - just a rather lengthy report on the new ISO satellite and a few bits and pieces on movements within the city. The Chief of Staff had taken him out to lunch and they had talked about cars. 402 had 'dropped by' one evening to play piquet, and had played a thoroughly dreadful game at that. And on the one occasion that Byrne had actually been permitted to talk about his experiences in the Valais, they'd grilled him endlessly and mercilessly - it had seemed more of an interrogation than a de-briefing - with just an off-hand apology tagged on to the end for their roughness. None of this was normal. None of this was right. And Byrne was damned if he could explain it. It was all quite beyond his understanding.

The door at which he eventually stopped was visibly no different from any of the others, all of which were spaced out at intervals of about five yards along the walls. It was white and faceless. He

entered a room that was more than five yards long and forced his usual cheerful greeting to C's personal secretary.

"He's waiting for you, Richard," she said coolly, "Go on in."

Within the inner office C was sitting in his usual position behind the grand desk. Byrne's report was open in front of him. He looked up on the agent's entrance and nodded briefly at the chair across the desk. Remaining standing, Byrne said, "You wanted to see me sir?"

"Sit down, 409," C said testily. He pressed an intercom switch and said, "Miss Wilson, please ask the Chief of Staff to come up."

Byrne sat down. C was motionless for a couple of minutes. His gaze was fixed upon the report, but he didn't appear to be reading it. Finally he sat back in his chair and commenced upon his pipe filling ritual. "So," he said at last, "this drug business of yours rather took a new face on, didn't it?"

"Sir," said Byrne, "I really am anxious to get back out there. So much time has been lost."

"Sorry 409, there is no there to get back out to any more." C found a photograph and handed it carefully across. "That's all that's left of Professor Weinstein's accommodation in Saas Fee. Bit of a mess, isn't it? A job for forensics, perhaps, but not for her majesty's finest." He paused slightly, looking for some sort of response. "Nonetheless, I think we're going to have to follow this one up."

Think? "I should say so, sir. And I really would be happy to work on that. I'd very much like to see the matter resolved."

"Actually, I'm assigning 402 to it," C said flatly.

Byrne felt the disappointment and anger rising in him. "May I ask why, sir?" he said sharply.

"As you do seem to appreciate, this is a matter of considerable urgency. I want someone to start work on the case immediately. And you've undergone quite a traumatic experience; you'll need, I'm sure, a few weeks' rest to get over it. I've made an appointment for you with Dr Grayson, incidentally." C handed over a reminder card. "For tomorrow."

Byrne could hardly believe his ears. Now he knew something was amiss. "With all due respect," he said, "I am the obvious choice for the case, sir. And I feel fine. And I don't need therapy."

"The decision has been made," C said. "You will keep the appointment."

The Chief of Staff entered. He smiled at Byrne and said to C, "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"I was just telling 409 to take a few weeks off. That won't be a problem, will it?"

"Not at all, sir."

"Good. Right, 409, you're briefing 402 this afternoon. Then you're on unofficial leave, as of tomorrow. But don't leave London without informing us - we might well need to get back in touch with you about this. As you say, you are the obvious man to ask. That's all. Chief of Staff, will you remain a few minutes?"

When Byrne had left the room C sighed and turned his attention back to his pipe.

"It's definitely him, sir," said the Chief of Staff. "Fingerprints, voice pattern, DNA - the whole damn lot checks out. That was Richard Byrne."

"Grayson'll soon find out if he's been hypnotised or brainwashed," said C. He tossed Byrne's report to one side and the gun it had been concealing gleamed in the glow of his desk lamp. "If he has been brainwashed," he added, "it would appear that I'm not the immediate target of his programmers."

"Sir, it was Byrne that came back from Romania. I'm sure of that too. What exactly would be the point in hypnotising someone into forgetting something that we already know to have happened? That would be futile. Why are we proceeding under this assumption?"

"Because certain people - and I count myself amongst them - have to be satisfied that all the rational routes of investigation have been properly and thoroughly followed before the abandonment of all sanity and sense can be permitted to take place. Who are we to assume that the enemy plan is logical? Who are we, come to that, to assume that the enemy plan is indeed *going* to plan? And what exactly do we have to go on? Where's the evidence? That telephone call you received could easily have been pulled off by an impersonator with a voice pattern encoder, and if they did manage to break Byrne in the time they had - and I think we have to assume for

now that they did - they could have got the password for the text embedder too. The intelligence reports could have been faked; so could that security video - piece of cake with the right computer program. If you ask me, someone's just trying to make a bloody fool out of us, and hasn't done too bad a job of it so far either."

C lit his pipe and shook the match out slowly. He puffed for a few minutes, gazing at the door through which Byrne had just left.

"At least," he said, "that's what I'll tell the Joint Intelligence Committee."

Life could be bitterly unfair at times, Byrne reflected, but that was just the way it was. He could complain, he could resign; but where would that get him? Life on the civilian streets seemed even more unappealing now than it had ever seemed before.

That night, he dreamt of a new life.

He was living in a little house on a mountainside. Outside, it was still and quiet, and in the valley below there lay a sleepy little ramshackle village. There was a wood-burning fire in the house and an endless supply of wood. There were settees that converted into beds and worn rugs upon cheap linoleum. And in the corner of one of the two small rooms there was a television set sitting on a table, placed on paper serviettes. Just above the screen the words 'PACC UNIT' were embossed in the plastic surround of the set.

He dreamt of logic and of freedom and of endless, endless thinking.

One month, three months; forever, if necessary. Byrne dreamt of waiting.